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VALUES AND COSMIC IMAGINATION

I

I shall mean by “cosmic imagination”, first, the mental appropriating of objects, events, processes or patterns perceived in nature-at-large (or “widest nature”), so as to apply them in articulating our own scheme of values (as we seek to establish, or to revise, these), and in our quest for self-understanding. I shall apply the phrase also to the synthesizing activity of the mind in our appraising of items in wider nature itself or as a whole – whether we believe nature to have no value save what we choose to confer or project on it, or take it to have a value that sets limits on our appropriation, benign or exploitative.

I start with brief critical examinations of two undoubtedly lively exercises in cosmic imagining – one from Wordsworth’s autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, and the other from a book published in 1995 by the contemporary revisionary theologian and philosopher of religion, Don Cupitt, which he entitled *Solar Ethics*.

First, Wordsworth. I know of no passage in English literature that illustrates more splendidly “cosmic imagination” in one of its aspects, and shows the unwitting ingenuity and unconscious resourcefulness that its exercise can involve – its proneness to illusion, also. It is from a well-known passage in Book XIII of *The Prelude* – Wordsworth’s ascent of Snowdon. What is vividly displayed there is the poet’s belief that his imagination’s operations are exalted in their dignity, if they can be seen as mirroring an activity *which nature on the grand scale* is also seen to manifest. The poet’s life and work are in this way revealed to have value and dignity by being so connected to nature’s ultimate, indeed quasi-divine powers and doings. In this passage, Wordsworth shows us imagination (as he believes) in the act of receiving that enhancement and validation.

Wordsworth's aim was to see the sunrise from the summit of Snowdon. The summer's night was close and warm with a "dripping mist / Low-hung and thick". Some way up the hillside, the ground brightened, "a Light upon the turf / Fell like a flash..." "The Moon stood naked in the Heavens, at height / Immense above my head, and on the shore / I found myself of a huge sea of mist," – mist at the level of Wordsworth's "very feet". A little way off was a "blue chasm; a fracture in the vapour, / A deep and gloomy breathing-place thro' which / Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams / Innumerable..."

In his later "meditation" Wordsworth discerned a powerful analogy ("a genuine Counterpart", he called it) between the poetic imagination, on the one hand – its transforming and constructive powers – and (on the other hand) the transforming, on the scale of the sublime natural landscape, of the normal appearance of that landscape, by the mist and the moonlight; and the making of that "fracture" in the mist that generated the chasm whose awesomeness prompted Wordsworth to call it the "Soul, the Imagination of the whole":

...and it appear'd to me
The perfect image of a mighty Mind,
Of one that feeds upon infinity, ...
... ..
One function of such mind had Nature there
Exhibited by putting forth, and that
With circumstance most awful and sublime,
That domination which she oftentimes
Exerts upon the outward face of things...
So moulds them, and endues, abstracts, combines...¹

The analogy, then, which ennobles Wordsworth's conception of his own "imaginative" vocation, affirms that human imagination relates to that transforming of experience which characterizes poetry, as nature's transforming power or mighty Mind (in the role of Imagination) relates to the transforming of natural objects so as to yield experiences such as Wordsworth's on Snowdon.² Now, what I want to add is the following: that Wordsworth's own imagination was active not only in the first portion of that diagram of analogical relationship – but also and equally vitally in the second. It is *Wordsworth's* imagination which interprets the natural scene on Snowdon, which takes or reads effects of mist and moonlight as transformations of what *would* have

¹ *The Prelude*, Book XIII, lines 10 – 116.

² See J.A.W. Heffernan, *Wordsworth's Theory of Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), chapter 4, particularly pp. 102–105. "For the rest of his life, [Wordsworth] firmly believed that when a poet transforms the visible universe by the power of his imagination, he imitates the creative action of nature herself" (p.105).

appeared, had the mist and moonlight *not* been there. "Nature had transformed nearly everything", writes his commentator. Yes, but here where nature transforms nature – the transforming agency and what is transformed are equally nature, and the decision what to think of as un-transformed and as transformed nature is itself the work of imagination – *our* imagination, or in this case Wordsworth's. To put my point crudely: the differentiating of the landscape *without* mist and moonlight from the landscape *with* these present, each being the effect of natural forces, must be wilful, *our* artefact, and can scarcely bear univocally the momentous interpretation Wordsworth seeks to put upon the experience. For that interpretation involves the thought of the operation of a distinct power of nature, or mighty Mind, analogous to the (unified but finite) human imagination.

"Wordsworth," says his critic, "... finds evidence in nature for ... a 'Power' which behaves like the human imagination". No, I want to say: ironically, though he seeks confirmation for the power and near-divine dignity of imagination, and believes – with wonderment – to have been given it on Snowdon; in order to set the stage, as it were, for that apotheosis of imagination, he has had to *employ* it, and on the grandest scale, in differentiating – from the sheer flux of natural events – a transforming Power (on the one side) from elements transformed (on the other); and so appear to furnish imagination with its ennobling cosmic counterpart. Or in other words, nature is made (by the poet's imagination) to set up its own stage-scenery by which to "write-large" the cosmic significance of imagination. The Snowdon-experience furnishes the "perfect image", "the express / Resemblance [of our 'glorious' imagination], in the fulness of its strength / Made visible". But, of course, the active agent here is Wordsworth himself, or the poet's own imagination, interpreting, projecting.

Alternatively, if we dwell on the metaphor of "projection" (and the passage richly illustrates the phenomenon), Wordsworth, all the time, has his eye upon the *poet's* imagination in relation to the subject-matter it seeks to transform and to mould. He then projects, in his meditation, that picture on to nature, and so sees it again there "writ large". This is not nature displaying imagination at work on a cosmic scale, from which the poet can accept ennoblement for his own lesser imaginative powers, but Wordsworth receiving an epiphany of his own imagination's contriving. In less noble language, imagination here has been pulling itself up by its own bootstraps.

I leave Wordsworth now, as a somewhat detached, perhaps admonitory, preface, and I shall jump, without further comment, from 1805 to 1995 and to the theologian, Don Cupitt, in his short book, *Solar Ethics*.³ There he makes rather spectacular use of cosmic imagery in commending a way of life for mankind. I want to sample this imagery. He invites his reader to see the human self as “a miniature counterpart of the world”. Like the cosmos as a whole, “it too burns, pours out and passes away. We should”, he claims, “burn brightly, all out”. Human fulfilment is to be found “not by giving the human self a special metaphysical status and delivering it from the world, but rather by melting it down into the flux of the world”, in its “spontaneous and joyful” self-affirmation – life’s “solar self-outpouring”. It will be a lifestyle of “pure expressive freedom”, of “all out religious expression”, an acceptance and celebration of contingency and transience: like the Sun, we live “by dying as we go out ... into expression”, in “heedless prodigal self-expenditure”. As the Sun is “its own outpouring self-expression”, its “headlong process of self-exteriorization”, so with ourselves – “there is nothing left for ethics to be but that we should love life and pour out our hearts”⁴.

“The world empowers you, pouring into you its own Dionysiac flux of upwelling energies; and you in complementary response go out into linguistic expression, into the action and the consciousness” which impart to the world its “... dazzling all-human beauty”. For Cupitt, there can be no conflict between such a choice of life-style and the imperatives of an objective moral law, for he denies that there exists such a law. The moral realism that once underpinned such notions, he says, with its attendant vocabulary, “is dead”.⁵

Where, if anywhere, does our salvation lie? “I have found salvation when I have found something that I can give my heart to”. And thereby we experience “the highest love of life and the purest love of death as being simply identical”. What, then, *do* people give their hearts to? It may be their homeland, their own “image”, ... or, for a teacher, a brilliant pupil. The object “does not matter very much”, so long as it acts as catalyst. “Love...hustles us rejoicing towards death”.⁶

³ Don Cupitt, *Solar Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1995). In discussing Cupitt I shall make use of material of mine first published in *Studies in World Christianity*, edited by J. L. Mackey, Vol., XX, No 1 – with the editor’s kind permission.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2, 3, 4, 13, 14, 48, 8, 9, 14, 15, 16, 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27, 45. On Cupitt’s dismissal of realism, see my comments in *Studies in World Christianity* – footnote 3, above.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 58, 59.

Cupitt's ethics, in this book at least, comes close to being a new version of "Follow nature" – *naturam sequi*: Be headlong, self-outpouring as the sun is.⁷ The analogy on which Cupitt relies is with the sun's energy, imagined as a glorious, chaotic out-pouring, a burning self-expenditure. But surely (I want to respond – in less headlong fashion) the operations of nature cannot be definitively *summed up* in such terms, as if those terms captured a uniquely essential character, normative for ourselves: or indeed as if cosmic imagination could in this way confirm or validate any single, practical style of life for man. Other aspects of nature offer imagination other analogies no less valid, from which we could read off very different possible implications for the living of human life. Nature is also rationally intelligible order, the evolving of complex organisms, structures hierarchically scaled and nested, up to the intricacy of our own brains. Let imagination brood upon these other aspects of nature, and we could derive strong pointers to such values as unity, integration, harmony, to an appreciative wonderment at the slowly and precariously emergent modes of awareness, rationality, sense of beauty, personhood: perhaps also a sense of ecological responsibility. Religious values do indeed suggest themselves here, but concerned with less frantic, less vertiginous experiences than those Cupitt proclaims: of which more soon.

Of course, if an ethic one-sidedly ignores the ideals of self-expression and self-fulfilment, it does present an impoverished life-plan. But no less distorted is an ethic that one-sidedly *celebrates* them, fails to build in checks to modes of self-fulfilment that harm others. To respect the needs and rights of others necessarily limits the individual's "heedless prodigal self-expenditure" – as Cupitt puts it. And his cosmic imaginings do nothing to promise such a needed balance. If it really doesn't matter very much what I can give my heart to, and supposing that the "catalyst" turns out in my case to be the pursuit of personal power over others (their bodies or their beliefs), it is only an acknowledged unconditional moral obligation to respect the freedom of others that can prevent my venture into "solar ethics" having a disastrous outcome. Or suppose we take seriously Cupitt's Romantic linking of love and death ("Love consumes us ... hustles us rejoicing towards death"; "...the highest love of life and the purest love of death ...[are experienced as]...simply identical"), at the very least this will again deflect us from that form of love which affirms and respects the value of the other, and from the self-love which, while acknowledging the reality of death, fights any self-destructive fantasies we may harbour. The pur-

⁷ Ibid., 8, 9.

suit of peak experiences, vivid but doomed, short-lived, followed by a fall-away (Icarus-like) into non-being – here is an “ethic” sadly, though today familiarly, off-balance. It exemplifies, dramatically, both the power and the fallibility of cosmic imagination: but to proclaim it, or to preach it, would be a doubtful service to the ethically perplexed.⁸

In a word, that same image of the sun with the thought of its burning-up, or indeed any powerful image of huge cosmic energies expending themselves, pell-mell, unplanned and uncontrolled, could equally well be coupled with altogether contrary normative judgements. “*That*”, we may say, “is the nature of the impersonal cosmos around us. *We*, however, within the world of *I* and *Thou* (while not denying ourselves the awesome spectacle those energies provide) must live in altogether different style, by altogether different laws, laws that counsel the cherishing, not the indifferent destroying, of the structures on which personal life depends; and the quiet furthering of life, so far and so long as we can fruitfully sustain it.” Only our autonomous, reasoned judgements of value, working upon the equivocal visions of cosmic imagination, can determine which interpretation to accept and endorse.

II

So: ventures in cosmic imagination can be exciting (indeed, intoxicating), puzzling and illusion-prone. After those extended examples, I would like, more soberly and on a more general level, to explore some of the roles of cosmic imagination in relation to value – moral and religious. This has to take us back to the level of basic value-theory, where I have much more sympathy with current moral realism or cognitivism than has Cupitt. In the context of a single lecture, these basics, however, can only be affirmed, not argued out.

When I say that I am drawn to a cognitivist-realist account of the most fundamental human values, I have the following familiar thoughts in mind: that such values as beneficence, justice, respect and our commitment to them cannot be adequately accounted for as expressions of feeling or emotion; that our emotions are themselves proper objects of our moral self-monitoring and not

⁸ To be fair to the author, there are places in the book where Cupitt does acknowledge other and very different values. For instance, “It now appears that we humans are...social animals who must co-operate...” and must “procure enough co-operation for survival”, and deal with our “discordant impulses” (45). But in *Solar Ethics* he does not indicate that much needs to be said about these; nor does he claim that we shall need a reasoned moral scrutiny of the “catalysts” or the styles of life they may instigate.

final moral arbitrators; and that, besides, there is such a thing as moral *authority* – not itself reducible to strength of feeling. Now I can accept for many moral judgements what has been called a “procedural” realism: that is to say, some version of universalizing procedure. But it is not sufficient for the grounding of all values. Those procedures which limit my permitted action have their grounding in the value of the “persons” who are to be respected. The worth of persons must be affirmed in a value-judgement at the end of the line of justifications, and such a terminal value-judgement requires of us either a lapse back to an emotivist analysis, or a realist-cognitivist account of a different kind. Opponents of moral realism will scorn an analysis of the latter sort as a lapse into an outmoded intuitionism, and take that as sufficient rebuttal. I see it differently: – we can opt either for an easy-to-grasp, broadly Humean, view of reason and its limits and an ultimate appeal to *de facto* “humanity” or sympathy; or accept that our experience of moral authority demands something else – something still cognitive, still seen as a discerning of what can in principle challenge any appeal to feeling or sentiment – though certainly at the cost of a much less tidy analysis.

III

On the appropriate *objects* of value-judgements, the simplest position would be to see values as belonging purely to the human life-world, the world of *I* and *Thou*, of perceptual (or “secondary”) qualities and emergent human “meanings”. Should the activities of cosmic imagination, then, be dismissed as a misconceived extension of the proper domain of human concern? That does not seem right either – for all their proneness to illusion. Whatever analysis we shall find ourselves giving of them, we do venture value-judgements – some hesitantly, but others very confidently – that go far beyond those life-world confines. We do so whenever we look at the heavens with awe or with dread, and ponder the benignity or oppressiveness or menace or beauty of the world: and we do so when we ponder how we ought to appraise and respond to items in wider nature itself (both sentient and non-sentient) – with indifference, or with respect. Whatever we decide in the end about these, it is hard to expel the thought that to exclude such reflection from the start – because all value-matters are internal to the life-world of persons – amounts to a serious self-diminishing.

There can be an oscillation in our thinking between what may be called an “over-distancing” and an “under-distancing” of the realm beyond the *I-Thou* world. We may so distance the realm beyond, that a comet is no more to us than a bright smudge in the night sky: a meteor-shower, a flicker of light-points only.⁹ The thought here is this – our values pertain to *our* world alone. Vast cosmic distances may have frightened Pascal, but, being altogether outside the value-world of *I* and *Thou*, they have no authority to trouble us, snug as we are within our life-world. “Snug” is of course absurd: but it may play a momentary role as I develop my claim that imaginative self-confinement to the *I-Thou* world does indeed “diminish” humanity, through an *over*-distancing of the objective-world. We may thus be lured into so insulating ourselves as to ignore environmental obligations and responsibilities, as well as denying ourselves rich possibilities of *aesthetic* experience. It is as if we were indulging a wish to remain in a child’s universe, refusing to allow our imagination to grow up: as if all value-matters could be settled before we peep beyond our person-with-person lives. But perhaps not even serious self-understanding and self-evaluation are feasible without *attempts* at wider connecting, whatever the risk of illusion in the operating of cosmic imagination.

Now it is equally easy to *under*-distance the world beyond the world of *I* and *Thou*. To do that is to see – or to think we see – messages, values to assimilate, everywhere in nature, though in reality we are mostly anthropomorphizing, unwittingly projecting upon nature aspects of our own life, values we have already autonomously deliberated upon and endorsed. That, I agree, is certainly the case in many instances, with many innocent cosmic imaginings in aesthetic mode. But that cannot be the whole story. For one thing, projecting of feelings cannot be the whole story about our moral relations with *non*-human sentient beings. The vagaries of sentiment cannot cover the sense that it would be morally wrong of me to ignore a suffering animal which I am uniquely placed to help – even when I am low in sympathetic feeling towards it: morally wrong also, more broadly, to acquiesce in policies that lead to the destruction of species. And this is not basically because (with Kant) I see such concern as good for the strengthening of my own moral relations with *human* beings, who alone, as rational, are the real objects of moral concern. The animal too, as a

⁹ There is an echo here of F. P. Ramsey’s often quoted remark that the stars are no more to us than three-penny bits, *The Foundations of Mathematics and Other Logical Essays* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1931), p. 291: also a distant memory of Antony Flew and R. W. Hepburn, “Problems of Perspective”, BBC Third Programme, Sept. 1955.

sentient other, is a no less real object of direct moral concern. We are constrained, then, to extend our cognitivist or realist account over other sentient life, in acknowledging that the valuing (respecting) of non-human animals is a genuine recognition of their otherness as it impinges on our awareness, and is not our own anthropomorphizing construction. Rather, it *cuts through* all such construction. It is a common experience to become aware that we have been anthropomorphizing about some bird or beast, to realize that we have apprehended it primarily as an item of our life-world furniture or fantasy (under-distanced, that is), and that “behind” that there is something to be grasped (at least approximated to in understanding) – namely what it is actually like to be that sentient creature. The tension here signals that projection is *not* all. The thought of *another consciousness*, other sentience, cannot be reduced simply to elements in our own life-world sensibility.

Must we not go a step further still? Is not a similarly cognitivist-realist account required for the claim that the natural world itself and as such ought properly to be an object of our “respect”, not of our proprietorial manipulation? For instance, our moral judgement against arrogant destructiveness in its various environmental forms surely again transcends our contingent and variable feelings (and precedes any projecting or gilding) as much as any parallel judgement in the domain of *I* and *Thou*.¹⁰

None of this denies that we *also* very commonly project and gild, as was amply illustrated by Wordsworth on Snowdon. That being so, my *overall* picture has to be one of a constant and complex interweaving of the different sorts of value-judgements (requiring more than one theoretical treatment – cognitivist in some cases, projectionist in others) in the reflective and imaginative human life. Given the presence of *some* realist judgements about wider nature, there is no case for confining serious value-deliberation to the *I* and *Thou* domain. We cannot dismiss as morally irrelevant our sensed affinities and antipathies with nature-at-large: rather, they must be scrutinized and appraised case by case.

It is another question, however, whether we can validly derive from our perception and reflection concerning wider nature alone any judgements about our own lives – about their “significance” or lack of it, or about particular life-choices that we ought to make. Are there in nature discernible patterns that we ought to imaginatively appropriate (*because* they are there in nature?) and on which we should model some of our own patterns of life? Answers have swung

¹⁰ I pick up the topic of respect again, below, p. 17.

between the poles of a Wordsworthian view of nature as man's "educator" and a position like that of J. S. Mill, who subjected the maxim, "Follow nature", to a sustained critique and repudiation. As I suggested earlier, I have to go along with Mill – though I would put the point in a more Kantian way, as an insistence upon autonomy.¹¹

Only in a (vain, ultimately incoherent) effort to deny that autonomy, can we speak (looking back to Cupitt, and quoting him again) of "melting down [the human self] into the flux of the world"¹². Images from wider nature keep us mindful of the context in which we act and try to appraise the significance and worth of our lives. But most often they are ambiguous or multi-interpretable, and they lack overriding authority. Despite the fact that we are *embodied* beings, and are, in that sense, one with physical nature, it is those factors that make for our *distinctiveness* that are decisively relevant in our life-planning, namely our freedom, language and reasoning power. Wider nature, lacking these, has no imperatives for us – certainly no *moral* imperatives.

So: the pervasive feature here is ambiguity. We ponder, for instance, the fact that many of the processes governing the universe display rationally intelligible and often aesthetically remarkable fundamental principles and structural forms. Can we see this as carrying an unambiguous implication for values? I think not. We *might* respond by feeling more at home in the universe. Alternatively, however, we could feel awed, but disturbed and dismayed that nevertheless the bodily vehicles of our own rationality and personal existence are so fragile and ephemeral, and that we are treated by nature-at-large – for all its rational aspects – with ultimate indifference as finite individuals. (Similar ambivalence can readily characterize our responses to cosmic "fine tuning".)

Suppose we were to become strongly aware of nature as indifferent or "callous". To read that expression on the face of nature can neither annihilate human values, nor (obviously) vindicate them. Love, compassion, justice, can be affirmed, harmoniously with, or despite, their wider context.

Nature, then, itself provides no resolution to the ambiguities – nor unequivocal "support" to the basic principles by which we might seek resolu-

¹¹ It will be clear that I am not working with a conception of autonomy which equates autonomy with a kind of individual relativism – each moral agent as fashioning his or her set of values. Rather, I take it to involve a refusal to let the determining of my moral action pass out of my rational deliberation – and a concern to grasp values I do not make but discover.

¹² Cupitt, quoted above, p.8.

tion. So we are thrown back on our own normative resources, to accept or reject the promptings and suggestions of images drawn from wider nature.

In his essay, "Platonism and the Gods of Place", Stephen Clark reminds us of the often-reproduced photograph of the Earth seen from orbit, on its own in space. "We all live," that image tells us, "within a single, beautiful and isolated world..." We go away from home, and we "look back and love it. Seeing the Earth, and so ourselves, from outside, we can realise who and what we are."¹³ We may well conclude that we have a solemn duty to tend or "shepherd" the Earth. Here again is cosmic imagination in vivid action. Nevertheless, it is not the image itself that generates on its own those moral judgements, not the image that has the moral authority to urge us to cherish the Earth, not despoil and plunder it. As far as the image alone is concerned, we might see it as expressing a desolate and hopeless isolation, or a cosmic absurdity, rather than an exquisite, and exquisitely vulnerable, centre of value. *Qua* cosmic imagining, each interpretation is as good as (as true to experience as) the others. We can distance ourselves from a cosmic-imaginative slant, acknowledge that it is there, presenting itself but not necessarily receiving our value-commitment. That is to say, we can slip in a wedge between "seeings-as", interpretations of cosmic imagination, and reflective, mature evaluation of the same item: between the positive, wondering interpretation of the Earth-in-space picture and a value-judgement that the Earth needs to be cherished.¹⁴

¹³ Stephen R.L. Clark, "Platonism and the Gods of Place", in T. D. J. Chappell, ed., *The Philosophy of the Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 19f.

¹⁴ Something has to be said about the distinction between what I have been calling the "*I-Thou*" context of value-deliberation and -judgement and "wider nature". For a start, it is tempting to label the former, "the (human) life-world" – and of course (whether or not anchored close to Husserl) the term is often enough used. But the concept of life-world has an unfortunately determinate ring to it. It is easy to see, however, that the distinction between what belongs to the life-world and what is supposed to lie beyond it can be made in many ways.

It is a matter of degree how far we modify our unschooled common-sense view of the world to take account in perception and belief of what we know of the world as it is beyond that common-sense view of it: the light- and sound-waves that cause our seeing and hearing, our planetary position in relation to sun, galaxy and beyond. Instead of any concept of life-world, we could work with a spectrum of degrees of "cognitive revision" or "adjustment". The scope and the limits of our knowledge may determine whereabouts on that spectrum we stabilize our "reading" of our world: but will, choice, decision may also play a part.

IV

In defining cosmic imagination, two main questions were distinguished. There is, first, the question about the items and ongoings in wider nature which may be thought relevant to our deliberation about how best to live. To that, I respond, in effect, that the sub-personal cannot instruct us in the conducting of personal existence. The normative basis of our moral lives cannot be found there. Powerful *illustrations*, analogies, metaphors, yes – but ambiguity also.

Second is the question about valuing items in wider nature itself and deliberating about appropriate attitudes of response. We have already strayed into its territory. The most seriously defensible exercises of cosmic imagination that I know tend to be answers to that second question, outwardly directed from our situation to wider nature, towards which we may come to see ourselves as having serious responsibilities. Those environmental philosophies which attempt today to rework moral, aesthetic, and religious attitudes to nature make it their chief concern. So will the remainder of this essay.

“Moral, aesthetic, and *religious*” – the word “religious” at once risks misunderstanding. I mean it in a very broad, but not empty, sense: its presence signalled by both formal and substantial factors. Formal – as involved in the most comprehensive imaginative syntheses, in *global* and *totalizing* evaluation and *ultimate* values; substantial – as taking account of such attitudes and emotions as respect, wonder and awe. These owe much of their meaning to their place in the development of traditional religions, but do not have to be restricted to those contexts, nor does their applicability necessarily depend on the soundness of the metaphysics that underlies those religions.

Is it possible, then, to argue for some specific ways in which value-thinking and imagination may be deployed – ways that are not vulnerable to the kind of criticisms I made earlier – in support of such a cosmic orientation? We resolve not to forget the ambiguities, not to be one-sided – for instance, neither frantic nor unrealistically euphoric, neither demonizing nature nor divinizing it, but concerned to contemplate and celebrate nature as it is, so far as that is a coherent objective. And we do seek to unify and stabilize our attitudes and appraisals as far as we can, but not at all costs and not in ways that falsify experience.

Ambiguous nature presents us not only with the image of headlong process towards extinction, but also with that of *equilibrium* – in both the inanimate and animate domains. If we dwell only on the former of these, the image of

“burn, all out!” works one-sidedly towards exalting the ephemeral and expendable in the human enterprise. It could intensify destructive and self-destructive urges. In the field of the arts, for instance, it could prompt hostility to valuable ideals of continuity, tradition and measured change, which together enormously expand our expressive range.

But, I am saying, as well as “headlong” self-outpouring, there is equilibrium: forces in balance that permit and sustain form and complex structure, that allow our personal, rational and purposive mode of existence to “ride” upon the impersonal and material, and the physical laws of nature. Closely connected are the aesthetically enlivening images of the “still centre”, and of a *contemplative* equilibrium, such as facilitates and sustains our present reflection itself. All of that can elicit wondering appreciation.

We pledged ourselves, however, not to forget the ambiguities, not to let the quest for unity falsify how things are; so the bright thought of equilibrium must be qualified by poignant awareness of its (living) instances as fragile and contingent: ephemeral and minute in a vast universe. “Ephemeral and minute” – certainly. But there is yet another aspect to bear in mind. Scientific cosmologists have been arguing that there can be no spots of equilibrium and no life, *without* those daunting spatial and temporal immensities: a fact which makes a difference to our imaginative grasping and responding to these. Learning that to create and sustain life, the universe *had* to be old and huge may well help to mitigate the more desolate and value-undermining responses that otherwise we are tempted to make to its indifferent emptiness.¹⁵

Would it then still be feasible to postulate a single unifying appraisal concept that – rising above the ambiguities – could regulate our attitudes and actions towards nature as a whole? Or would it show only a blind commitment to the monistic? I spoke tentatively of venturing a cognitivist account of an obligation to *respect* nature-at-large. But what could we mean here by “respect”? Can a single sense of the word apply to all we know of nature?

The principle of MUTUAL LOVE [wrote Kant] admonishes men constantly to *come closer* to one another; that of the RESPECT they owe one another, to keep *at a distance* from one another...

¹⁵ Cf John D. Barrow, *The Artful Universe* (London: Penguin Books 1995), pp. 38, 39: “Billions of years are needed to produce elements like carbon, which provide the building blocks for complexity and life. Hence, a universe containing living things must be an old universe. But, since the universe is expanding, an old universe must also be a large one.”

... a duty of free respect towards others is ...analogous to the duty of Right *not to encroach* upon what belongs to anyone.

...The duty of respect for my neighbour is ... *not to degrade* any other man to a mere means to my ends ...¹⁶

Kant is writing about “rational beings”, and obviously we cannot transfer this *in toto* to relations with *impersonal*, non-human and non-living nature: yet there are tempting analogies, and we can extend the scope of respect under their tutelage. Respect for widest nature too requires *distancing* – as acknowledgement of the variety of beings and modes of being, and accepts these as setting a *limit* on our action, our “encroachment”. The concept of “degradation” is also readily extendible to some of our dealings with non-human nature. Respect refuses to treat nature as unlimitedly exploitable, unchecked by any principle superior to human self-interest. “Distancing” acknowledges otherness, and others’ desire or striving to persist in their own modes of being. Respect in this sense requires us to realize the fragility of processes and ecological interdependencies necessary to effects that we have reason to value.

But can we move, from this minimal though vital “hands off!” requirement, to any stronger sense or senses in which nature-at-large is to be the object of our respect – and stably so? I doubt it. To speak of nature is (necessarily) to speak of the only ultimate source of all development, creativity, conscious life and freedom: yet the same nature can of course be indifferently destructive of long-evolving species, through climatic change, competitive defeat or impact of bodies from beyond the Earth. The highest organisms we know can be brought down by minute viruses; nature has no built-in means whereby to protect its own created hierarchies.

Recall the huge destruction of potentiality in nature – potentialities of individual lives started and quickly brought to a frustrated end; as well as the suffering inflicted endlessly by one living thing on another. We have to incorporate in our would-be unified nature-respecting orientation an element of sadness and regret concerning the predatory entanglements of animals – deeply built-in, and without which they would have to be utterly different in anatomical structure, behaviour, habitat, and so in identity.

When we are checked, for instance, by reflecting that the well-being of some particular creature depends upon its preying successfully on others for which we have no less respect and no less compassion, a familiar instability

¹⁶ *The Metaphysic of Morals* (The Doctrine of Virtue), Part II, Ch. 1, Section I, Divisions 24f. (Italics are mine.)

enters our search for an fitting sustainable attitude. Perhaps then we are simply confirming that there is to be no “rising above ambiguity” in our attitudes to nature: no single fundamental guiding principle. Respect is checked by the inextricable tangle of creative-destructive in nature. “Respect for nature” will stave off our damaging ecological meddling, but if we allow the concept to advance any way towards resuming its richer positive connotations, we find “respect” ill-matched to nature’s operations. Of course we anthropomorphize if we call those operations “callous” or “stupid”: but “respect” seems poised to err in the other direction.

As in moral philosophy we may well end with an irreducible plurality of fundamental concepts, so here too: though there is room only to suggest what these might include. *Wonder* may not have to back down as, it seems, respect has to in some contexts. While respect, in all but its minimal sense, involves an element of acquiescence or approval, wonder – in both questioning and appreciative modes – can be free of ontological and evaluative presuppositions.

Again, where sentient and suffering nature is concerned, our overall orientation cannot be without *compassion* as one of its key concepts. Nature-at-large cannot provide it: *we* cannot withhold it.

Respect, wonder, compassion: I suggest, then, that we need such a cluster of concepts – at least these – rather than entrust the guiding of attitudes to a single one, to be inevitably over-stretched and attenuated.¹⁷

V

In the first group of topics, we saw ourselves as over-against nature, and we looked to nature for “messages” of instruction or inspiration: the emphasis was ultimately on *ourselves*, to be instructed or inspired. The second group put the emphasis upon *nature* – still seen as over-against us and distinct from us, the object of our respect, wonder, compassion. Thirdly, however, we may become aware that our situation is *not* in fact properly described as “over-against” nature. I am not thinking of the fact, important as it is, that we exist as part and parcel of nature, not as opposed to it; but of the fact that we *create* as well as *dis-*

¹⁷ There is a many-sided discussion of closely related issues in Alan Holland, “The use and abuse of ecological concepts in environmental ethics”, *Biodiversity and Conservation* 4, 812-826 (1995).

cover in our cognitive relation with wider nature, that we partly *constitute* the nature we experience and come to know.

Iris Murdoch responded sympathetically to the view that “man saves or cherishes creation by lending a consciousness to nature”.¹⁸ I would like to develop that intriguing and potent thought in my own way: we are privileged to be able to *add* to nature as it would be without us, by causing it to burgeon forth in the light of our consciousness. We organize the elements of our perceptual field – say a landscape – by way of our bodily standpoint, our selective colour-vision, our imagination’s synthesizing power and limits, our phenomenal “feels” and associations, memories shared and un-shared, all of which make our experience a rich, complex and unique addition to the world.

I spoke earlier about the “self-diminishing” that occurs if we try to limit or proscribe the flight of imagination. The point I am now making can be seen as combating a further and serious means of self-diminishing. This takes the form of understanding the “life-world”, the un-revised world of everyday human perception, as no more than a meagre selection from the fullness of the objective world, the result of our perceptual filtering, limiting, reducing. Of course, these reductions constantly occur; but (to repeat) the range of conscious experience thereby made actual constitutes also an individual, distinctive *positive* contribution to the diversity of the world. Our experience of colour, for instance, adds a qualitative diversity that is not present in the objective-level quantitative gradation of wave-lengths of light, even though its diversifying goes on only within a very limited range.

The relationship is a symbiotic one: it is on *nature’s* provision that we exercise our own perceptual-creative-imaginative efforts. Nature and ourselves are indissolubly co-authors, for instance, of our *aesthetic* experience. For we do not *invent* the features of nature-as-it-ultimately-is, by virtue of which we – with our own distinctive perceptual apparatus – can experience nature as beautiful. There is still a strong element of givenness and contingency there. More generally, the task is to avoid self-diminishing without lurching to the opposite error of exaggerating our creative role.

¹⁸ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto, 1992), p.252. Timothy Sprigge discusses related topics, in *The Philosophy of the Environment*, p. 127. Relevant also is Mikel Dufrenne, *Phénoménologie de l’expérience esthétique*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1953), II, ch. IV.

VI

Given an exuberant metaphysical-religious imagination, a writer may be strongly tempted to “go over the top” and to see the human subject’s contribution, great as it is, as greater still – and beyond what sober reason could endorse. We can see – and enjoy – an example of such a lyrically enhanced account in C. G. Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, where Jung recounts his visit to an African game reserve:

To the very brink of the horizon we saw gigantic herds of animals: gazelle, antelope, gnu, zebra, warthog ... Grazing, heads nodding, the herds moved forward like slow rivers. ... This was the stillness of the eternal beginning... ... There the cosmic meaning of consciousness became overwhelmingly clear to me. ... I, in an invisible act of creation, put the stamp of perfection on the world by giving it objective existence.

Now I knew ... that man is indispensable for the completion of creation; that ... he is the second creator of the world, who alone has given to the world its objective existence – without which, unheard, unseen, silently eating, giving birth, dying, heads nodding through hundreds of millions of years, it would have gone on in the profoundest night of non-being ... Human consciousness created objective existence and meaning, and man found his indispensable place in the great process of being¹⁹

Although it is necessarily true that before the coming of “human consciousness” no-one had had the experience Jung describes, he is not – surely not – entitled to say that we have given “objective existence” to the world. He could – and did – speak of our *completing* the world – a completion in which the animals, their visible forms, sounds, the course of their lives, are brought together, synthesized by our imagination, understood, grasped and valued. As I have been claiming, *that* vision, together with its appreciation, *is* uniquely our work.

Nevertheless, it is surely better to risk some lyrical hyperbole than to acquiesce in a wasteful abandoning of religious values and attitudes and responses which, wrongly, we may judge to be brought down – all of them – along with the metaphysics of theism.

¹⁹ C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, (London: Fontana Press 1995), 284f.