

On the Recovery of Experience and the Search for a Christian Environmentalism

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The world is the most beautiful—for it is god's making.

—A saying ascribed to Thales.¹

“TO DEFEND the truth, to articulate it with humility and conviction, and to bear witness to it in life are,” in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, “exacting and indispensable forms of charity.”² Truth is indeed a universal good; prudently and dispassionately to bring the light of truth into human affairs always serves the cause of humanity, especially where truth is most fragmented or veiled. Among today's leading cultural trends, environmentalism may be the one standing most in need of the careful analysis of principles, the far-seeing weighing of consequences, and precise, non-ideological speech. The Pope's discussion of the environment in *Caritas in Veritate* is, therefore, an important example of the very intellectual charity he describes. Environmentalism, much like contemporary economic and political life, does seem likely to benefit from a dose of papal reasonableness. Yet Benedict XVI does not merely correct; in *Caritas in Veritate* he also praises certain contemporary economic and political initiatives, even secular ones. Following his example, we would do well to ask what contemporary environmentalism might have to offer to our common pursuit of the good of “the whole man and [of] every man.”³ Perhaps the most salutary feature of contemporary environmentalism is its concern that our generation recover first-hand experience of

¹ Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 2nd edition (London: Penguin, 2001), 15.

² Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, §1.

³ See *Caritas in Veritate*, §18: “The truth of development consists in its completeness: if it does not involve the whole man and every man, it is not true development.”

nature. If the search for a Christian environmentalism were to lead to a genuine recovery of experience, not only would a deeper and more widespread gratitude for the Creation likely result, but we might also discover fruitful soil for the renewal of Catholic philosophy envisioned and called for by John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Beginning in Experience

Many environmentalists are devoted students of nature; most naturalists, it seems, are also environmentalists, at least with some degree of commitment. Such a coincidence can hardly be accidental. We can love only what we know, and we tend to study what we love. In his popular ecological primer, *Reading the Forested Landscape*, Tom Wessels suggests that learning to perceive the essential structural features of a stand of trees can help to bring about a change in sentiment: "This new way of seeing creates reverence, respect, a sense of inclusion, and accountability. Reading the landscape is not just about identifying landscape patterns; more importantly, it is an interactive narrative that involves humans and nature."⁴ The ability to perceive and to understand the effects of disturbance upon a forest, gained by repeated walks in the woods, can promote a sense of responsibility for the land. If experience shapes our desires, it just as plainly shapes knowledge and skill. In an essay published several years ago in the *American Naturalist*, marine ecologist Paul Dayton warned that even should the desire to conserve the environment be present, the knowledge of how to do so will not unless our ecologists and conservationists gain more extensive first-hand experience of nature. "Very few students," he lamented, "are offered the opportunity of observing nature and accumulating the background natural history essential to the ecological understanding" that the task of conservation requires. His point is worth underscoring. Practicing ecologists readily admit that the work of "knowledgeable local" biologists exercising "sound judgment" about the ecological communities they study is indispensable for any useful or trustworthy assessment of the healthy structure and function of a given ecosystem.⁵ Dayton's universal

⁴ Tom Wessels, *Reading the Forested Landscape: A Natural History of New England* (Woodstock, VT: Countryman Press, 1997), 21. Although Wessels's use of "reverence" is fraught with ambiguity, it may very well be fruitful if understood correctly. Consider, in this regard, De Koninck: "Descartes may have been a good man, indeed a good Christian, but in philosophy he lacked *pietas*, just as he lacked true reverence toward the things of nature." Charles De Koninck, "Three Sources of Philosophy," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 38 (1964): 13–22, at 20.

⁵ See James R. Karr, "Assessment of Biotic Integrity Using Fish Communities," *Fisheries* 6 (1981): 21–27.

conclusion is, then, well-stated: "We cannot protect or restore what we do not know."⁶

Is the first-hand experience of nature now something rare? So argues Richard Louv in his much talked-about book, *Last Child in the Woods*. This wide-ranging and ambitious essay points out the dangers of what Louv thinks to be so common a condition as to merit the clinical name of "nature-deficit disorder." By this phrase he means "the human costs of alienation from nature" such as the "diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses."⁷ Thanks to the progressive urbanization of our society (less than 2 percent of the American population now lives on farms), to a habit of an immoderate use of television, and to the spread of air-conditioning, children growing up today are likely to be appallingly ignorant of the most basic natural phenomena and, what is more, utterly carefree in their ignorance. Louv cites a recent British study showing "that the average eight-year-old was better able to identify characters from the Japanese card trading game Pokemon than native species in the community where they lived: Pikachu, Metapod, and Wigglytuff were names more familiar to them than otter, beetle, and oak tree."⁸ Alarmed by the near-total victory of computer games over the activities that were the source of his childhood delights—especially building tree houses and romping through the woods—and fearing that "as the care for nature increasingly becomes an intellectual concept severed from the joyful experience of the outdoors," Louv asks with some urgency, "Where will the future environmentalists come from?"⁹ Like the ecologists Wessels and Dayton, he sees the remedy in a renewed cultivation of the first-hand experience of nature.

A recovery of the experience of nature, however, will only come about as the result of a determined effort, for, as Edward S. Reed has argued, both our shared habits of mind and our common way of life have made meaningful first-hand experience difficult to attain. In his 1996 essay *The Necessity of Experience*, Reed criticized the notion that the emerging information-based economy would pay dividends in happier workers more able to employ their creative talents and to thrive in worker-centered environments. Our reigning management styles and doctrines, he argued, would ensure that most would instead be "doomed to spend much of

⁶ Paul K. Dayton, "The Importance of the Natural Sciences to Conservation," *The American Naturalist* 162 (2003): 1–13, at 12.

⁷ Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (New York: Workman, 2005), 34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 145–46.

[their] work time . . . pushing buttons, dragging light beams, and responding like machines to symbols created by someone else.”¹⁰ Nor did he think us more likely to experience reality at home, for there we tend to encounter the world not directly, but through various media. “Now people look at television,” Reed observed, “they no longer look at things for themselves.” The danger of this habit stems not only from the fact that the information is selected for us, but also that it is increasingly presented to us in the form of what he called a “multilevel montage” in which a variety of sounds and images are spliced and re-presented in ways in which they never could be by nature. This technique, he admitted, “makes for fast-moving, snappy commercials and music videos,” and, we might add, flashy websites, but it also “by definition replaces the causal structure of real experience with narrative structure(s) and voice(s).”¹¹ In other words, both at work and at play, we are continually presented with second-hand information and pre-packaged perception. Such a condition, in Reed’s estimation, is an eery *reductio ad absurdum* of the tendency common to modern philosophy to degrade or even to reject primary experience as naive and pre-critical.¹² And even if most Catholic philosophers defend the reliability of our sense impressions—and thus our experience of the world—in one way or another, these are defenses against arguments, not attempts to adjust and to correct widely shared and deeply ingrained habits. If Reed, Louv, and the naturalists are correct, however, our divorce from the world is a problem in need of practical remedies.

Common to these arguments in favor of experience is that they dwell upon the consequences of our loss of it, consequences as diverse as psychological disorder, the loss of understanding, and changes in desire. This common feature should not, upon reflection, be a cause of surprise. It is hardly possible to vindicate the necessity of sense experience by an appeal to some prior principle; how, after all, would such a principle come to be known if not through experience? What can be added to their diagnosis, however, is an attempt to identify the kind of experience they seek to recover and to explain its salient features. The kind of person who enjoys the experience promoted by the environmentalists seems plain enough: it is the student of nature, the naturalist. But what kind of experience of nature does the naturalist enjoy? In order to sketch an answer, we can do no better than to attend to the example and the writings of the first of naturalists, Aristotle.

¹⁰ Edward S. Reed, *The Necessity of Experience* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 108, 110–11. The parentheses are Reed’s.

¹² See *ibid.*, 10–18.

Pied Beauty

Born to a physician's family, Aristotle took a keen interest in living things and their bodies, and, what is more, he paid close attention to the more extensive and specialized experience of those who were entirely devoted to some aspect of nature. Physicians, accordingly, figure in his works not only as examples of artisans but also as authorities in their own right, at least, that is, when they are what he called the "more philosophical kind" of physicians. Even fishermen were to him a source of knowledge about nature.¹³ As to Aristotle's own field work, no less a naturalist than Darwin called him "one of the greatest, if not the greatest, observers that ever lived."¹⁴ It is a commonplace among scholars that Aristotle's biological studies helped to shape his view of substance and to support his confidence that the universal names we predicate of individual living things are less the products of human willfulness than signs of constraints imposed by the things themselves. "Aristotle, as much as any naturalist," wrote G. E. R. Lloyd, "appreciated that while it is the individual specimen that the biologist investigates, he does so from the point of view of the species as a whole and of what is common to all or most of its members, not from the point of view of the peculiarities of the individual specimen itself."¹⁵ In a similar vein, Marjorie Grene asked why we should "take all this trouble with the arid texts of Aristotle?" Precisely because Aristotle was a biologist, and "biology can teach us better and more directly than the exact sciences the all-important role of pattern in the world and of comprehension in our knowledge of it."¹⁶ Both comments point to the essential contours of the naturalist's way of knowing: he first distinguishes the differences among individual things, and then perceives the patterns that rise above the differences.

Let us consider how a young naturalist might come to learn about the woods near his home. The first impressions, of course, are vague: the woods are dark compared to the grassy yard. The trees are tall, with brown trunks and green leaves. Soon, however, attention is repaid with the awareness of

¹³ On the physicians who "study their art more philosophically," see Aristotle, *Sense and Sensibilia* 1 (436a20) and also his *On Youth, Old Age, Life and Death, and Respiration*, 27(21) (480b26ff.). Fishing and fishermen appear, *inter alia*, in *History of Animals*, 8.2, 8.19, and 9.37. All quotations of the works of Aristotle are taken from *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

¹⁴ In a letter of 1879, quoted in Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution* (New York: Norton, 1959), 169.

¹⁵ G. E. R. Lloyd, *Aristotle: The Growth and Structure of his Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 91–92.

¹⁶ Marjorie Grene, *A Portrait of Aristotle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 229.

differences. Some trees have needles, others have leaves. Of those with leaves, some are compound, others simple; some have leaves in pairs on opposite sides of the branches, others have leaves that alternate, first on one side of the branch, then on the other. The needle-bearing trees sometimes have needles arranged singly on the branch, sometimes in bundles of 2, 3, or even 5 needles each. With the help of some additional study and a guide-book or two, the student is soon able to perceive that common features bind together different trees in spite of marked differences among individuals. A young Black Cherry growing on the edge of a field looks very different from an older one growing amidst the forest; a Pitch Pine on deep, moist soil almost looks like its aristocratic cousin the White Pine, but on a dry, rocky, south-facing slope it reverts to its normal, misshapen self. To the beginner, this wide variation among individuals causes confusion, but as more time is spent comparing individuals, the common nature becomes perceptible. This comparison is, as Aquinas notes, a “kind of reasoning,” for what is required of the naturalist is to interrogate his senses by repeatedly asking himself to attend to the differences they reveal: are the lobes of the leaf tipped in spines or rounded? Are the lobes deeply or shallowly incised? Is the leaf smooth or velvety? Is the tree growing in a wet area or a dry one?¹⁷ Eventually, from the forest and its welter of differences, the kinds of trees begin to stand out and to be recognized for what they are, and being known, they are named.¹⁸ As his wanderings in the woods continue, the naturalist is able to see patterns in the distribution of these kinds: the Hemlocks and Red Maples are often found near stream beds or in wet soils, the Hickories and White Oaks on the dry hillsides; here is a pure stand of Sugar Maple, there is a mixed stand of Red and White Oaks, Sugar Maple, and Hickory, with Paper Birch, Red Maple, and White Pine on the margins. These patterns both shed further light upon the specific characteristics of the trees and also prompt the naturalist to wonder about their causes.

In all of this wondering and wandering, the naturalist’s attention is taken up by the trees themselves, which he contemplates in the condition in which they are found, as independently existing individuals. Here lies the most striking difference between the practice of the naturalist or natural historian and of the contemporary scientist, who analyzes from the first. Thus Theophrastus, Aristotle’s successor at the Lyceum, argued that the

¹⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics*, Book II, Lectio 19, trans. Richard Berquist (South Bend, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 2007), 339. “Experience requires a kind of reasoning about particulars, a reasoning that compares one thing to another.”

¹⁸ Compare Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 94, a. 3, sed contra: “Nomina autem debent naturis rerum congruere.”

study of plants ought to begin with the consideration of the tree, for the tree is a complete plant, in addition to being the easiest to study because the longest-lived and the largest.¹⁹ Today's typical botany textbook, by comparison, begins with the cell, which, though doubtless worthy of attention, is hardly first in our experience.²⁰ Aristotle, likewise, considers animals as integral wholes and compares them to one another "in their modes of subsistence, in their actions, in their habits, and in their parts"; even his consideration of the differing parts of animals is made in view of how the whole animals relate to one another and how the different kinds of animal bodies relate to the human body.²¹ This emphasis on understanding the individual living thing as an integral whole accords well with the moral impulse of contemporary environmentalism. Although in some quarters attempts are being made to redefine the concept of biodiversity in the broadest possible terms, we are not likely to see many placards calling for us to "Save the Viruses." Bluebirds, dolphins, and orchids motivate environmentalists because they can be seen and appreciated as growing, living, and reproducing beings. Birdhouses are built and Starlings and Sparrows are evicted from them because conservationists are able to recognize the goodness of Bluebirds, a goodness sufficiently plain to trump the claims of pluralism. Environmentalists fight for the lives of these creatures because they have seen them, beheld their beauty, and come to appreciate their goodness.

In their considering and beholding, naturalists develop a certain virtue that is worthy of wide imitation. Nature, as the sage put it, "loves to hide," and anyone who has spent some time in birdwatching knows the truth of that saying.²² A firm disposition to attend to nature must be acquired if one is to learn about living things. Not only must one brave inclement weather, wet feet, bug bites, and poison ivy, but, most importantly, the naturalist must learn to be still and quiet. It may in part be thanks to his own field experience that Aristotle said that "the possession of understanding and knowledge is produced by the soul's settling down out of the restlessness natural to it."²³ A trip into the field with a naturalist in early autumn may help to show how this is so. Our first impressions are of the colors: blaze-red maples against a backdrop of green pines and a light blue

¹⁹ See Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants* [1.1.11], trans. Sir Arthur Hort (London: Heinemann, 1956), I:15.

²⁰ See "The Plant Cell," the first section of Peter H. Raven, Ray F. Evert, and Susan E. Eichhorn, *Biology of Plants*, 4th edition (New York: Worth Publishing, 1986), 13–67.

²¹ This quotation is from Aristotle's *History of Animals* 1.1, 487a11–12. See also *History of Animals* 1.6, 491a14–22.

²² Heraclitus, quoted in Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 68.

²³ Aristotle, *Physics* 7.3, 247b18–20.

sky. There are no birds to be seen, so the naturalist bids us to listen. At first, there is nothing but road noise to be heard. Then harsh caws and jays stand out, and, in the distance, the honking of geese. As we settle down further and attend more carefully, other sounds emerge: the liquid note of a Robin from atop a pine; a persistent chip followed by a flash of red through the alders—a Cardinal; an odd, almost frog-sounding *mawk, mawk* from a tree trunk, and from the same tree, “dee-dee-dee”—the Nuthatch and the Chickadee. A few moments later we hear the rhythmic per-chick-o-ree of a Goldfinch flying overhead followed by the mewing of the last Catbird to linger in the north. Such are the sounds of a modest but good trip into the field: the students heard and saw what the naturalist expected and were able to profit from his ability to direct their senses.²⁴ The excellence that the naturalist-teacher has attained through practice is in turn handed on to his students; it is an excellence of the use of the senses, an attentiveness that seems to make his hearing more acute and his eyesight more sharp, because he has learned how to watch and to listen.²⁵

This attentiveness is not merely a physical skill like the ability to ride a bicycle; it is also an intellectual disposition that manifests itself in studious practices.²⁶ Here the example of John James Audubon is instructive. In the introduction to the final volume of his *Ornithological Biography*, Audubon left his readers a piece of advice. Expecting them to be “full of ardor” to learn about birds, he counseled them to “leave nothing to memory.” “Note down all our observations,” he said, and “with ink, not with black-lead pencil; and keep in mind that the more particulars you write at the time, the more you will afterwards recollect.”²⁷ It is surely a home truth that the eye, like the mind, tends to wander. Every parent knows the importance of insisting upon eye contact with errant children: if the message is to go home, the eyes must be met. Audubon’s practice reveals a similar home-spun wisdom. Who

²⁴ Compare Aquinas’s “On the Teacher,” in Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Ralph McInerney (London: Penguin, 1998), 199: “The teacher leads another in the same way to knowledge of the unknown as one by discovery brings himself to knowledge of the unknown.”

²⁵ In his attempt to secure the primacy of vision, Hans Jonas has, I think, overstated the case about the comparative passivity of hearing. The kind of “attentiveness” that he admits to be necessary for good hearing in fact requires considerable discipline. See Jonas, “The Nobility of Sight,” in *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 139.

²⁶ Compare Thomas Hibbs, *Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion: Metaphysics and Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 36: “Can we conceive of the full range of our activities, including intellectual activities, as practices, involving a host of relevant virtues?”

²⁷ John James Audubon, *Ornithological Biography* [1839] in *The Audubon Reader*, ed. Richard Rhodes (New York: Knopf, 2006), 608–9.

has not sat on a stone wall or bench and enjoyed a distant view of a mountain or a sunset or a shoreline? In mere seconds the mind is dulled by the loveliness of the scene and the eyes, in concert with dreamy sentiment, begin to glaze over. Only the most vague impressions are likely to remain because, in fact, few details were seen. As if to guard against this tendency, Audubon habitually focused his mind and his eyes by taking notes and by sketching, and so do all serious naturalists. And the reason why is plain: "The mere attempt . . . to create an artistic form compels the artist to take a fresh look at the visible reality; it requires authentic and personal observation."²⁸ By cultivating such a habit of observation, we can come to employ our senses more attentively, and perhaps even, as Pieper so insistently recommended two generations ago, learn how to see again.

It is all to the good to have more detailed and memorable experiences of the natural world, but how, one might ask, do they contribute both to the grounding of an environmental ethic and to the renewal of philosophy? The answer, I believe, is that genuine first-hand experience of nature gives rise to wonder.²⁹ Like Thales marveling at the regularity of the heavens, the naturalist perceives patterns and order in nature and is prompted to ask the reason for the orderliness. Real wonder—and here the Latin *admiratio* may be more suggestive—implies a recognition of the beauty of the created order, an intelligible beauty that points to the possibility of wonder's fulfillment in knowledge. Aquinas even maintains that wonder, though a species of fear, can be "a cause of delight to the extent that it has joined to it a hope of attaining the knowledge of what one desires to know."³⁰ We do not admire random occurrences; we are frightened by them. Yet even a blizzard can be admired, though its power is feared, because it follows an intelligible course. If wonder is in the first place a "path towards the seeking of wisdom," it can also be "the deepest source of the moral impulse."³¹ "Tell me what you admire," said the late Servais Pinckaers, "and I will tell who you are."³² The naturalist, ever-attentive to

²⁸ Josef Pieper, "Learning How to See Again," in *Only the Lover Sings* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 31–36, at 35.

²⁹ For a suggestive approach to this point, see James V. Schall, "The Metaphysics of Walking," in *The Life of the Mind: On the Joys and Travails of Thinking* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), 91–107.

³⁰ *ST I-II*, q. 32, a. 8, corpus: "Et ideo admiratio est causa delectationis inquantum habet adiunctam spem consequendi cognitionem eius quod scire desiderat."

³¹ *ST I-II*, q. 32, a. 8. The second objection begins "admiratio est principium sapientiae, quasi via ad inquirendum veritatem."

³² Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *A l'école de l'admiration* (Paris: Editions St. Paul, 2001), 5. "L'admiration constitue, à notre avis, la source la plus profonde de l'énergie et de la qualité morale."

differences, to “All things counter, original, spare, [and] strange,” may occasionally catch a glimpse of the source, of the one “whose beauty is past change,” and, if his spirit has not been entirely beaten down by the grim rhetoric of Darwinism, may be moved to “Praise him.”³³ The movement of the soul captured in the 104th Psalm is most natural to human beings in the presence of the wonders of nature. The contemporary environmentalist’s love for “cedars of Lebanon” and “high mountains” with their “wild goats” is lacking not so much in gratitude as in gratitude’s proper object. The language employed by Pope Benedict in *Caritas in Veritate* ought therefore to be congenial to open-minded environmentalists, for it affirms the goodness of the earth: “The environment is God’s gift . . . it is prior to us . . . it is a wondrous work . . . containing a ‘grammar’ which sets forth ends and criteria for wise use.”³⁴ That grammar, we might add, may only be learned from the Creation itself; the fabrications of human theory, when imposed upon nature, all too often result in ugly wounds.

A grateful admiration of the beauty, intelligibility, and goodness of the Creation also holds much promise for the renewal of philosophy. That there is a moral disposition necessary for the attainment of truth has become a common theme in the last two pontificates. Benedict XVI has told us that we need “courage” in order to “engage the whole breadth of reason”; and in order for our inquiries to be fruitful, they must be undertaken, John Paul II taught, “with mind and heart rightly tuned.”³⁵ A revived philosophy will, of course, take the form of sharper arguments, clearer propositions, and more expansive explanations, but it will not be brought about by love of argument alone. The love of argument makes us disputatious; it is the love of truth that enlivens the philosophical soul and inspires courageous study. And though we catch mere glimpses of it, this truth is written into the natures of things. Philosophy’s daily work is indeed like a meaty fist thumping with an argument the Manichees cannot answer, but its origin and growth are in gazing over hills and asking “What is God?” If concern for the condition of the earth prompts the next generation of students more often to stare admiringly at the hills, and by attentive watching and listening to nourish their capacity for wonder, then the cause of truth will have been well served by environmentalism. N-V

³³ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty,” in Hopkins, *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 132–33.

³⁴ *Caritas in Veritate*, §48.

³⁵ Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflection”; John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §48.