

'Life, Love and Suffering - From Demanding Human Rights to Appreciating Human Needs'

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Theme

The source of our human capacity to suffer is also vital to our ability to live, love and be loved. By denigrating it, through an unrealistic aspiration to individual or collective autonomy, we aggravate rather than eliminate suffering. By acknowledging it, we allow compassionate wisdom and natural creativity to flourish in our midst

Autonomous Denial

“Breast cancer, I can now report, did not make me prettier or stronger, more feminine or spiritual. What it gave me, if you want to call this a 'gift', was a very personal, agonising encounter with an ideological force in American culture that I had not been aware of before - one that encourages us to deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune and blame only ourselves for our fate” [From 'Smile or

Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World, by Barbara Ehrenreich, Granta, January 2010].

“This notion, which now involves seeing everything natural as an object, inert, senseless and detached from us, arose as part of the dualist vision of a split between body and soul. It was designed to glorify God by removing all competing spiritual forces from the realm of nature...Why do we still think like this? Why

can't we be more realistic?" Mary Midgely, reviewing 'The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World, by Iain McGilchrist in Saturday Guardian, 020110.

*"You've got to ac-cent-tchu-ate the positive
Elim-my-nate the negative
Latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mr In-between"*
Johnny Mercer (1944)

The way we human beings view our capacity to suffer and die profoundly affects the way we understand our relationships with one another and the natural world that we inhabit. Even, and perhaps especially, what many of us view as our most detached and rational ways of thinking may be more rooted in the psychology of fear than a realistic appraisal of our actual situation and natural neighbourhood.

A common way of dealing with something we fear is to try to ward it off or pretend that it doesn't exist or amounts to nothing. In the words of Robert Frost:

"Nature does not complete things. She is chaotic. Man must finish, and he does so by making a garden and building a wall"

In other words, we may try to eliminate the source of uncertainty and loss that we associate with pain and mortality by imposing the unnaturally definable order of a 'whole way of thinking' on the wildness around and within our selves. We aspire to be complete, self-sufficient individuals in our own right, capable of extending our dominion – or the dominion of One who we are prepared to subjugate our selves to – to the edge of a completely knowable world in which we can preserve our safe passage forever. We then proceed to embed this aspiration in our logic,

theology, science and systems of governance, to the point where we regard its reality as unquestionable. We might even have the temerity to declare that:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”

Alternatively, we may shift the notion of completeness and autonomy from individual to collective, holding that

“The whole is more than the sum of its parts” Aristotle

and thereby subordinating the uniqueness of the particular to the requirements of the global in which it is supposedly inextricably embedded and connected, tangibly or intangibly, to all others.

The real truth, however, is that to sustain such ultimately paradoxical belief systems, we have to build them upon a logical foundation that is inconsistent with evidence and does not make consistent sense – the supposition that material form can either be isolated from or is co-extensive with space. For this to be true space would have to be divisible or containable – that is, to stop and/or start at discrete boundary limits, like a sea detached from river or river detached from sea.

“The river is within us; the sea is all about us” T S Eliot

“This space I can imagine empty, but I cannot imagine the thing without the space” L. Wittgenstein

If natural form was purely material, it could consist of no more than a dimensionless point with no shape or size. If natural form was purely spatial, it

would be featureless. If nature consisted purely of solid, massy particles and space wasn't a natural presence, nothing could move. If space was just an infinite emptiness surrounding discrete objects, there would be no place to situate an external source of force to move these objects around. If space wasn't within and throughout as well as around natural form, it wouldn't be possible for form to be distinguishable or to flow as liquid or gas or to have variable qualities of density, bounciness, flexibility and conductivity.

"The attempt to impose definition on indeterminacy and degree and exception is about the straightest road to mischief I know of - very deeply worn, very well travelled" Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*

"In nature, everything is distinct, yet nothing defined into absolute, independent singleness" William Wordsworth

"No man is an island, entire of it self" John Donne

Hence it is inescapable that the natural world of movement and mobility that we sense and inhabit cannot be defined completely into hard and fast categories. There is no absolutely closed form that we know of or can know of. Space is energetically included in form and form in space. Space is an indivisible, indefinable presence of openness everywhere, infinite at all scales, not an empty absence of definable presence within or outside the finite bounds of discrete, active and reactive material objects. In relationship with energetic form, space has a receptive quality that *induces* flow. In relationship with omnipresent space, energetic form has a responsive quality that enables it to flow into place.

This is the understanding of the creative evolutionary wildness of natural energy flow that has been called 'natural inclusionality', to distinguish it from the 'objective rationality' of definitive assumptions that underpin individualism and collectivism, reductionism and (w)holism. According to natural inclusionality, all

natural form is variably viscous 'flow-form' – an energetic configuration of space in figure and figure in space. The inherently static logic of discrete definition, which excludes or unnaturally confines the continuous space throughout and beyond all natural distinguishable form, is thereby subsumed by a fluid logic of 'the included middle', where the latter is the seat of dynamic correspondence, not dichotomy, between local figural and non-local spatial presences. These presences combine in dynamically distinct but not isolated bodily identities as natural inclusions of 'everywhere' in 'somewhere'.

Inclusional Acceptance

Definitive thinking, driven perhaps most fundamentally by an understandable desire to prevent suffering by imposing an unnaturally discrete order on things, has a very unfortunate outcome, which actually aggravates instead of alleviating human distress and conflict. By treating suffering as the consequence of *imperfection*, viewed as any absence of regularity or 'spot of bother' either within or outside our selves or natural neighbourhood, it seeks to restore order through the imposition of discrete limits – most often manifest in some form of defensive wall. Since these limits serve 'positively' to preserve the 'ideal' autonomous perfection of individual or group, whatever source of wildness – from volcanic eruption to 'foreign' invasion – appears capable of eroding them is viewed 'negatively' as a flaw or adversary that we must battle against to survive. Yet these very same limits also cut us off from what we actually depend on for dear life, whether we perceive this as Nature, God or both.

“To be or not to be, that is the question: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them?” Hamlet

So we get caught in a double bind that holds us solely responsible for our behaviour - whereupon we either only have ourselves to blame when we suffer

(i.e. there is something wrong *with* us if we suffer – pain and death are the wages of sin, insubordination, bad genes, bad attitude etc) or we blame God/Nature/Evil for making it/allowing it to happen. This leads us to disparage either those who suffer (with whom we have no sympathy because it's their own stupid 'fault') or that/those which seem to inflict or allow suffering. One way and another, we try not to admit (i.e. to exclude/deny) suffering by removing or sealing our bodily selves off from what we perceive as its source. But always at the root of such disparagement/inadmission is the groundless abstract rationalistic assumption that autonomy is 'real', a product either of our self-definition as discontinuous material bodies split apart from space, or group definition within a seamless whole entire of it self.

Natural inclusionality radically changes our perception of the source of human vulnerability and recognizes this also as vital to our ability to live, love and be loved. This source is nothing less than the receptive space and creative potential that all definitive ways of thinking intransigently ignore or deny.

With the recognition that suffering is an inescapable implication of our natural inclusion of and in receptive space, vital to our ability to live, love and be loved, comes a very different attitude. Suffering is not directly attributable to anyone or anything's 'fault', as such, and so should not be disparaged or denied, but alleviated through the receptive and needful capacity for love and care in which it is sourced. We move from angrily declaring our autonomous right to be happy and not to suffer, or serenely denying the distinctness of our bodily selves, to accepting our receptive human need for love and care. This 'need' is our receptive 'negative strength' through which we sustain our lives, not our despicable 'positive weakness'.

This is why the constant demand for 'positivity' and disdain for 'negativity' (as an admission of human need) evident in modern culture is deeply counter-inclusional. Natural inclusionality entails the dynamic balancing of 'positive' and

'negative' flow and counterflow under each other's reciprocal influence through the continuity of receptive space, not the battle for dominion of one against the other as discontinuous forces. To sustain this balance it is vital to include 'Mr In-Between' as the dynamic interfacing that both distinguishes each from other and provides spatial passage between them.

*“You’ve got to ack-knowl-age ev-ry positive
Affirm ev-ry negative
Grant Space of the Inclusional
And Inter-face with Mr In-between”
Roy Reynolds (2010)*

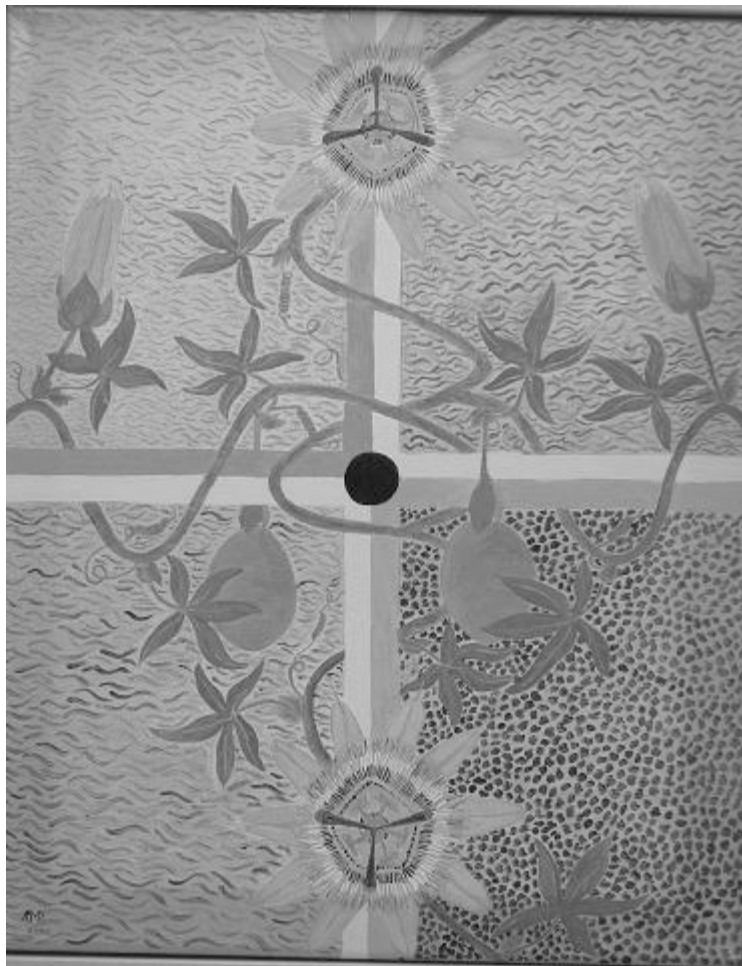


Figure 1. *“How Compassion fruits”* (From an oil painting by Alan Rayner on canvas, 2008). Life, love and suffering spring from the same source of receptive space that is present within, throughout and beyond the earth, air, fire and water of inspiring and expiring natural flow forms as energetic configurations. These natural figures dynamically balance receptive negative influence and responsive positive influence through the reflective zero-point core of their local and non-local self-identity.