Wilderness *contra* Civilization: A phenomenological perspective

Abstract

In the following essay, it is argued that a conventional way of speaking about wilderness and civilization as properties of the lived-in world entirely misses an important aspect of them. A multi-dimensional narrative on the nature of wilderness and the opposition it forms with civilization will be stitched together by first meditating upon them in their *invariances*, and then in their *changes*, and ultimately, in their *unity*. We will ultimately situate them both in their proper relationship with respect to each other as well as with an oft-posited underlying 'natural' world.

Whenever we find ourselves facing a question of considerable depth, there arises a quandary regarding the right way of *approaching* it. In this case, the question is made explicit as follows: What is the right way of approach of analysing our notions of wilderness and civilization? Where should we begin, really, when dealing with such towering inquiries?

Or should we ask, rather: Where *can* we begin, really? And we see that, not altogether surprisingly, our inquiry can begin only with our raw, everyday understandings of these notions, in all their vagueness.

It is clear that whenever the words 'wilderness' and 'civilization' are uttered in the same breath, it is typically in order to bring out a contrast between the two. But a contrast can only be brought out *upon a common ground*, so to speak; a common ground between the two which must be established beforehand. One can speak of the differences between two things only when there is something common which they share, which forms the backdrop; and it is against this invariant backdrop that these differences can be observed.

And so, in any utterance of wilderness *contra* civilization, there is, in the first place, the suggestion of a transformation, an isomorphism between the milieu of wilderness and that of civilization; taking in all the elements of the former and returning strange distortions of it for us to reexperience. To see this, we throw them up against each other and appraise the structure of the halo created in their great clash.

Let us try, for instance, to imagine what kind of an entity the sky must have

seemed in its concrete being for the man of wilderness. As he looks up, his gaze falls upon something which seems to be defined by its being beyond his reach; he finds that his gaze can do naught but fall on that clear, blue, cloudless sky cocooning his whole world. His field of vision attempted without success to encompass it; it is an object which hung above him perennially, and existed alongside him virtually everywhere he went. For primitive man, the sky melted away into the background of his everyday world as an object of an immortal omniscience and primordial creation.

Fluctuations in the appearance of the sky acquired a great significance themselves. Eclipses and thunderstorms were unnatural and strange; they were a consequence of the wrath of the Gods, and gave the whole world a fearful pallor.

Today, we know as men of space that even the sky has its limits; that there is a beyond and an end even for the sky itself. But how have we dared tear down that great old symbol? *Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?*[1]

These symbolic elements of the great sky of old live on vicariously, through various aspects of this milieu of civilization which has replaced that of wilderness.

For do we not experience an entity with this very pervasive omniscience every time we, after a casual conversation with a friend, find an eerily relevant advertisement on Facebook or Google? Does not the plethora of such advertisements that the observant individual notices indicate back phenomenally to the presence of some insidious all-seeing eye from which there is no escape? *Is not this omniscience just as real and inescapable for us as the omniscience of the sky once was?*

An eclipse no longer fills us with fear and foreboding, but the prospect of the Internet collapsing and shutting down has, slowly but surely, attained those very qualities of fear and foreboding; indeed, Internet blackouts are the eclipses of today. This has only been brought into sharp focus by how heavily we depended on the Internet as we struggled through the lockdown precipitated by the pandemic, locked inside our houses and rendered unable to step out and enjoy the sunshine and the sky.

We can press on with the story. In the life of wilderness, the sun was phenomenally both the closest and the farthest from us, by virtue of the manner in which it functioned.

When one steps out in the open, for the most part, the sun is not an object

[1]Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, 1844-1900. The Gay Science; with a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs. New York :Vintage Books, 1974.

one is consciously aware of. At the same time, its presence implicitly carves out a plenum of time for us in the world, and it thereby co-determines our movement. When it stands right overhead, it pushes us underneath the tree for shade. When the threads by which its heat holds us slacken, it urges our footfalls to become faster, lest we fail to reach our shelter before it disappears altogether. Only on some special occasions does our pre-theoretical awareness become a conscious one; sparingly did it show itself as itself. And yet, it always made its presence known through the web of existence. In this manner, the sun sustains its paradoxical combination of proximity and distance.

But is it not true that the institutional structures set up today act upon us in precisely this paradoxical manner? With their oft-chimeric promises of a better life, they minutely guide the footsteps of millions of people who harbour a fervent desire to satisfy these structures and glean their benefits. We impute upon the institution the very same power of creation that the sky and the Sun once had. The notion is explicit when we turn to colloquialisms: We often utter phrases like, "Getting accepted into this Institute will make my life."

At the same time, this network of interrelationships is patently an *invisible* one, for the most part; even more transparent is the fact that we rarely reflect on them with the sharpness with which we *should* reflect, given how deeply they run. Bogged down in their mire, we often forget that the ultimate purpose of many of our actions are entrenched with keeping our Institutes happy with us. Many of the things we read and write are at least partly motivated by such concerns of material success or academic furtherance; the fact that we recognise them as such show up so rarely only goes to show how deeply embedded they are in our lives. The profound ways in which these Institutes exercise control on our lives is a well-analysed notion.[2] With this, the paradoxical function of the sun is thereby reproduced.

So far, we have provisionally indicated the common ground sensed by all when speaking of wilderness and civilization in the typically contrasting manner. But the strangeness of the conclusion that the Sky and the Sun have transformed into the Internet and the Institute leads us on to an even stranger notion: From where do these invariances in man's experienced life arise? Are we, with this, approaching a 'natural' structure of mankind, something intrinsic to the human condition, underlying the endless chatter of the worlds of wilderness and civilization into which we are thrown? And is it coherent to formulate a question regarding the proximity of each of these worlds with this natural state of man?

The famous psychoanalyst Carl Jung expresses his view on the matter as the follows:

[2]See, for example, the work of Michel Foucault.

"What we call civilized consciousness has steadily separated itself from the basic instincts. But these instincts have not disappeared. They have merely lost their contact with our consciousness and are thus forced to assert themselves in an indirect fashion. This may be by means of physical symptoms in the case of neurosis, or by means of incidents of various kinds, like unaccountable moods, unexpected forgetfulness, or mistakes in speech."[3]

According to him, the irrationalities of our wilderness-era instincts are inescapable, but also useful; the 'scientific chauvinism' of modern civilization has deemed them as undesirable but only hidden them out of plain sight, making them more elusive to find, put underneath the mask of rational respectability. Modern man's psyche is split from within insofar as he attempts to hide his own instincts from himself.

Jung conceives of the invariances in terms of how *our* internal propensities, ways of grasping life and viewing the world remain unchanged; however, in the (admittedly impressionistic) sketches provided here so far, an attempt has been made to put the matter in terms of *how the world speaks to us*, rather than the reverse. In such a reversal, our agency for making sense of the world around us begins to erode, and we let the world speak for itself; it is never entirely *me, my* instincts, which make the phenomena around me show themselves as they are.

But we must break off this suggestive train of thought here for the moment, and pay heed to another force pulling us elsewhere: For as we take into account these observations of the enduring conditions of man and his world, an even more forceful dynamism grabs us by the scruff of our neck and demands our attention. Our investigation began with the manner in which man *contrasts* wilderness and civilization, and the time has now come to make this explicit.

A hammer as a weapon in the hand has turned into an tool for construction; the significances it held in its warlike aspect have now changed completely. There is the evident sense in which every object in the world has changed. One may then ask: How has this change shown up for us? And the first and foremost answers are, as we shall see, articulated by a certain *hypocrisy*, and a certain *schizophrenia*.

We often feel the stirring of deep sentiments and longings when speaking of the wilderness and 'natural' life we take to lie on the other side of this change. At the end of the day, we often find ourselves wanting to have nothing to do with civilization, wishing to just sit beside a calm sea underneath a cool foliage and watch the all-powerful sun set; men of science seem to renounce the intellectualism of civilization just as they reach the paroxysms of their work; wilderness still appears as an ultimate escape from the chaos of the world.

[3] Jung, C G, and Marie-Luise . Franz. Man and His Symbols. New York: Dell Pub. Co, 1964. Print. Turabian (6th ed.).

But why all the struggling and striving, the sacrifice of lives across millennia, the painful overcoming of the flaws of self, and the endless outward gaze onto a better future, if, after it was all done, we denounce it all and wish only to "go back to nature"? From where comes this apotheotic schizophrenia of civilization itself? Is it a feature or a bug? And even within this schizophrenia itself, another one: We always wish to only partake of certain aspects of the wild; we typically want only the simpleness of its lifestyle, its direct contact with 'nature'——and never the pathetic deaths and other associated sufferings the wilderness brings with it in its fullness. Our experience of wilderness will always be of it as a facsimile, a forcefully limited simulation.

And so, the *moral* structure of the contrast is uncovered as follows: We are *hypocrites* insofar as we use the tools of civilization to denounce its own self; we are *schizophrenic* in an *explicit* way insofar as we seem to want to return to nature and 'get away from it all' in spite of every advancement to the contrary in civilization that we ourselves make; and we are *schizophrenic* in an *implicit* way insofar as our denouncement of civilization itself reveals a certain affinity towards it, signaling the fact that, even in our proclamations to go back to wilderness, we really only want to experience certain select aspects of it.

But we must now recognize the fact that this nested schizophrenia is, in the first place, possible only under a certain structure in our understanding of the world. Our conceptions of wilderness must always be *against* that of civilization, and vice-versa. There is a figure-ground relation between the two, and they must exist either together or not at all. Our experiences of civilization shape our notions of wilderness: and our experiences of wilderness also shape our notions of civilization; the snake bites its own tail.

From the absence of wilderness in our civilized life stems a certain conception of it due to our experiences in civilization; by the shock of the contrast that we get when we find the opportunity to experience this wilderness, our understanding of civilization is wholly re-evaluated——so does the cycle persevere.

Such a figure-ground structure is ubiquitous across various theories of perception (most prominently in Gestalt psychology). In the most basic instance, one sees the black printed words as the 'figure' and the white background the paper offers as the 'ground'. However, there exist certain ambiguous cases, such as the Rubin vase, in which a *reversal* of the figure-ground relation is possible: In it, one may either see a white vase on a black background, or two black face profiles on a white background. It is noteworthy that, at a given point of time, only *one* interpretation of the two can be maintained.

In this case, the suggestion is that we may either view the figure of wilderness against the ground of civilization, or vice-versa. Since our existence has been firmly rooted in civilization, we have become capable of viewing this ambiguous

image in one orientation alone (the one with civilization forming the ground).

Finally, let us return to the hammer: For the analogy can go further. Consider the curves of the image of Rubin's vase. One may have two interpretations for it: As part of the shape of the vase or the curve of a nose on a face, depending on how we view the whole figure. Similarly, a hammer becomes a tool or a weapon depending on the way in which we are engaged with the world it is embedded in.

From this intertwining relationship stems the sense and the consequence of the gradual change that civilization brought about in our relationship with wilderness. For we enjoy our moments of solitude in nature not for its own sake, but only when it is put *against* a lifetime of experience in the mire of civilization——and the existence of this contrast is *essential* to our enjoyment. This is what both aspects—hypocrisy and schizophrenia—point towards. In the fact that Saint Don Manuel was able to control his existential despair only by unceasingly subjecting the world around him to a dizzying series of changes until his very last breath, he may well represent a general and seemingly eternal fact about mankind.[4] We approach the stillness of the sea only because we cannot live with ourselves in stillness, and we know to sing praises to the glory of nature in her wilderness only as we destroy her.

We may yet analyze the sense and the consequences of this change scientifically. But after rigorously exposing ourselves to ourselves as schizophrenics, as hypocrites, we must forgo couching any description of it in moral terms. Being in proximity with nature is 'good', and excessive industrialization is 'bad', it has been said——*but for whom*? For the civilized man, and none other. Civilization always forms the pervasive backdrop to these ideas we have, and as long as we treat wilderness as an object within the context of civilization and fail to acknowledge it as its equal, we shall never overcome the temptations of improper comparisons.

In order to drive this point home even more forcefully, let us turn to another phenomenon which all of us have had to suffer through over the last year or so: The forced and necessary digitalization of the intersubjective experience. At one fell swoop, it became clear to everybody involved that certain intentional acts——for instance, like teaching——could never be reproduced through a screen: And this, even if all the content remained identical to the pre-pandemic one.

So, what prevents our simulations of wilderness from approaching the 'real' thing? What is it, really, that prevents the YouTube video from having the same force as being in the classroom? One is often left with a feeling of inability to point out anything but the most superficial and blatant differences between the two; the *real* stumbling block seems to have been left unarticulated.

[4]Unamuno, Miguel de, 1864-1936. San Manuel Bueno, Mártir. Salamanca [Spain] :Ediciones Almar, 2000.

The simple fact is that the content being taught by the lecturer does not merely appear to be, but *is* entirely different when the context is that of an online video meet——as opposed to a classroom. The symbols and the lecturer who presents them are more *reachable* by virtue of the classroom setting; two hitherto inconceivable modes of action——muting and switching off one's video——adds to the feeling of distance between oneself and the teaching activity. With the general mood of one's peers being rendered imperceptible in a video, the symbols on the board further attain a phenomenal ambiguity with regards to just how one should digest them. A temporal sensitivity possessed by the symbols is simultaneously increased and decreased: For one cannot refer to a classmate sitting beside if one has missed a certain point, thereby increasing the significance of an individual temporal point to one which we cannot afford to miss; and yet, one can watch the recorded video of the class as many times as one wishes, whenever one wishes, thereby making any temporal restrictions immaterial.

But what is the precise manner in which the laptop and the classroom, the objects we wish to contrast, have shown up in the above investigation? Patently, they seem to have not shown up at all, except as an environment: They do not situate themselves as objects which we interact with detachedly, and nor are they showing up as tools to be used, the way a footballer may use the ball; rather, they engulf us the way a stadium, the field and the goalposts engulfs the footballer.

The point that emerges from this introspection is that, in the final analysis, the digital simulation and the real-life experience are not features of the world at all: They are what *determine* features as features. When one stands in a lit room looking around at the objects in it, one is never cognizant of the light, illuminating it all and melting away into the background: This is the role played by the essences to which these words refer. We can comprehend objects only under the transparency of this illuminating light in the background; and as such, the light itself remains forever unseen, operating upon us in its own strange fashion.

This is what we really mean by wilderness; by civilization. We are *in* civilization (or wilderness) in this wholly existential manner, and therefore never experience it except as that which *lets* us experience.

The analysis propounded here is, in certain deliberate ways, reminiscent of the manner in which the philosopher Martin Heidegger problematized the question of the meaning of being. In asking what it means to say that an entity 'is', one is forced to concede that the being of an entity itself cannot be another entity—rather, it is 'that which determines entities as entities, that on the basis of which entities are already understood". [5] Much like how being forms this great background to our possibilities of understanding an entity, the structures

[5]Heidegger, Martin, John Macquarrie, and Edward Robinson. Being and Time. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1962.

signified by civilization and wilderness do the same.

But yet another way in which one may problematize this question is by saying that 'being' is that in terms of which an entity is made *intelligible* to us. Without delving deeper into Heidegger's philosophy itself, we pick up on this cue as another feature of civilization (or wilderness).

The way a hammer is intelligible to us, as a phenomenal entity, is a function of the backdrop from which it emerges: A weapon in wilderness, and as a tool in civilization. In the former case, it will have around it an air of destruction, blood and wrathfulness; in the latter, an aura of mechanicalness, of toil, of construction. To put the point forward with a sharper example: A diagram of the modern periodic table will be genuinely unintelligible to a human being in wilderness, for they completely lack the *background context* required—one which we possess—to make it intelligible. Similarly, a hammer is intelligible in the modern sense only if there are nails to hammer, which will be the case only if there are things to build, and so on...

The upshot of all this is that civilization is thus not a *feature* of the world: It *is* the world, and must be understood and spoken of appropriately. It is only due to the context introduced by it that our words and actions acquire their full meaning.

It is now clear that in no meaningful sense can any notion of wilderness or civilization be said to be 'closer' to this natural state of man alluded to earlier. Any metric exists only within a certain background environment; indeed, no metric can span across worlds——thus rendering us unable to impose any such notion of proximity upon them. We cannot 'step outside' of civilization and appraise it, for when we try to step outside, we immediately find ourselves trapped——in nothingness.

For what we *mean* by the word 'natural', the things it connotes, the imagery it generates, itself has a dependence on us being a product of civilization—and this, not in any mere platitudinal sense: The sense expressed by a word may well have been, for man in his wilderness, *entirely unintelligible*, may have been outside the limits of his very language. The meaning of a word is its use[6]: But what use does the man of wilderness have for half the notions that the man of civilization keeps with himself—and vice-versa?

How, then, can we offer any truly metaphysical import to this natural state of man? Indeed, what do we find when we press on, ask ourselves what we *can* find underneath the spaces of 'the wild' and 'the civilized', and try to reach out beyond?

[6]Wittgenstein, Ludwig, and G E. M. Anscombe. Philosophical Investigations. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997.

At this point, we are left with only the barest of standing ground to utter anything at all. One thing and one thing only can be said that has a meaning across these worlds of existence: That man, as a creature, has always a *primordial openness to the world*. One may be a part of the wild, or a part of the civilized; but the context notwithstanding, what remains eternal is the fact that his self is always engaged in an inseparable feedback loop, in an unending flux, with his world. And every metaphysical structure beyond this opaque foundational act is *essentially* defined by a tendency to obscurantism, contradiction and incomprehensibility.

This openness to the world, one's *lumen naturale* shining onto a clearing, is the foundational act defining beings such as ourselves. That which lies in the clearing expresses itself to us in terms of this light we shine on it; and on occasion, by dimming the light and slackening the threads of our intentionality, we may try to understand the phenomena as they show themselves in themselves (rather than as they show themselves via the forms we impose onto them), as was hinted at before.

Such an openness can never be associated with some isolated subjectivity; the world towards which we are open is constitutive of it. Just as a hammer would be meaningless without any nails to hammer, there can be no openness without a world to be open towards.

Nor should such a light be misread as the light of anything such as 'rationality'. The narrowness of such categories renders them incapable of doing anything as all-encompassing as making the world intelligible in its wholeness, which constitutes part of the function of this openness.

Our being lights up the world and appropriates the phenomena it sees in a manner conditioned by the way in which it finds itself in the world; wilderness and civilization each correspond to some manner of finding oneself in the world.

The holistic structure of this openness alone is what cuts into the essence of human existence; for in the face of all possible contingencies, it alone is what remains grounded.

Indeed, what gives us the right to say anything at all beyond this? Even as we fool ourselves into believing that we are approaching a more refined view of nature in parallel with our advancement from wilderness to civilization, we find that nature itself simply dances its eternal dance and, like a tornado which whirls about and throws out when you get too close to it, smiles joyously and hurls us into another network of ambiguities.