

**LEARNING FROM NATURE**  
A Phenomenology of Landscape

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## Abstract

Learning from Nature is a new way to understand the place of human beings in the world. It is also the first step in inquiring about the laws of the material world, the interrelation of these laws with the human world and, finally, the link between Nature, Man and Spirit. The premises of this investigation lie in the concept of substance; the first step is the phenomenon and, the direction or method, is the phenomenology. Having established the components of our study in a theoretical approach, we shall follow the method with a practical example: the contemplation of a landscape.

## **THE IMAGE**

**On the mountain, a tree:**

**The image of DEVELOPMENT.**

**Thus the superior man abides in dignity and virtue,**

**In order to improve the mores.**

The tree in the mountain is visible from afar, and its development influences the landscape of the entire region. It does not shoot up like a swamp plant; its growth proceeds gradually. Thus also the work of influencing people can be only gradual. No sudden influence or awakening is of lasting effect. Progress must be quite gradual, and in order to obtain such progress in public opinion and in the mores of the people, it is necessary for the personality to acquire influence and weight. This comes about through careful and constant work on one's own moral development.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The I Ching, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977) p. 205.

## I. Introduction

We are in Sierra de Grazalema (Cadiz, Spain). We are contemplating a landscape: a tree on a mountain. At the bottom, a valley. We enjoy the landscape aesthetically but we ask ourselves if the landscape can teach us something and if, through it, we can reach a more transcendental knowledge. The first step, thus, in all intellectual inquiry is to know the goal to reach or, at least, the direction or intention of research. But we need something more: the method. Without the appropriate tool it is impossible to accomplish our goal, and usually the proper method is the only way to successfully finish our investigation. Furthermore, the more accurate the method is, the more rich and deep our understanding will be. What follows from this is how important it is to establish the correct premises and how fundamental the role of methodology is in all investigation. To learn from Nature we must first try to understand the concept of substance, use the phenomenology as method and, finally, try to grasp the meaning of the First Substance, that is, the Spirit or God.

1. The Concept of Substance. The first premise in our study of Nature consists in defining the concept of substance. "It is very true that when several predicates are attributed to one and the same subject, and this subject it is not attributed to any other, one call this subject an individual substance."<sup>2</sup> He adds, to make this statement more understandable: "that is what philosophers call 'in-esse', when they say that the predicate 'is' in the subject."<sup>3</sup> From this it follows that we have to pursue a reductive process that eliminates successive predicates until reaching one subject impossible to attribute to any other. First, we have to define what is necessary to exclude from the subjects to extract the substance. "An accident is a being whose notion does not include all that can be attributed to the subject to which this notion is attributed."<sup>4</sup> Now, in all our steps we have to ask ourselves if a subject possesses all the attributes or, on the contrary, must be referred to other one. In the last case we have to continue the process of abstraction. In the first case we shall have arrived at understanding the first cause of all substances: God.

There are two important considerations about properties of substances that will be very useful to consider in our study of Nature. First, the fact that substances express themselves in more or less of a degree. When a substance changes its expression for the better we can say that it is active. If, on the contrary, it is affected by others it is then passive. The pleasure or happiness accompanies action and the pain always goes with passion. From this it follows the fundamental importance of the method. We also have to consider another property of substances: its causality or order. The causality principle allows us to make observations about the future based on the past and vice versa. In this way, we are able not only to transform the past, present and future realities but we are also able to transform ourselves according with our will. In other words, the more we know about substances the more we will be able to modify its expression. The correct method will be again one of the most important factors in our investigation.

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<sup>2</sup> G.W. Leibniz, Philosophical Writings, (London: Everyman's Library), 1973 p.18.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.18

<sup>4</sup> Id.

2. The Importance of Method. Descartes, Spinoza and Husserl are considered among the philosophers who are more concerned with the use of a correct methodology. Indeed, we can say that their method is their philosophy. For this reason I have chosen Spinoza's The Emendation of Intellect<sup>5</sup> to establish how an appropriate method is the key to successfully accomplish our goal. This goal is not an intellectual abstraction of Spinoza. Nevertheless, his conclusion is to bring joy to human beings. "But love toward the eternal and infinite thing feeds the mind with a joy entirely exempt from sadness."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, this joy must be shared with other human beings: "But the highest good is to arrive together with other individuals -if possible- at the enjoyment of such a nature."<sup>7</sup> There are three ways that Spinoza proposes to reach this end. First, to understand as much as we can. Second, to form a society in which everybody is able to share this knowledge, and third, to consider ethics as the most important factor in education.

The first step, however, must be "a way of healing the intellect, and purifying it, as much as we can in the beginning, so that it understands things successfully, without error and as well as possible."<sup>8</sup> To do this it is necessary to accurately consider the different ways of understanding reality. There are four kinds of perception. We have perception from report, from random experience, from essence of a thing not adequately inferred from another thing and, finally, perceptions of a thing perceived through its essence alone. For example, as Spinoza adds, from report we know our date of birth; from random experience we know that we shall die or that oil is capable of feeding fire; from an inadequate inference we can think that far away things are smaller than in reality. As we have seen, only the last perception is without danger of error because when we comprehend the adequate essence of a thing, we do not need ulterior steps. In Spinoza's words "from this it is clear that certainty is nothing but the objective essence itself."<sup>9</sup>

At this point, we can ask if there is something that can be considered a first idea from which we can derive others. The role of method will be; thus, to show a true idea and to do this, nothing is better than to begin with Nature: "And since it is clear through itself that the mind understands itself the better the more it understands Nature, it is evident from that, that this part of the Method will be more perfect as the mind understands more things, and will be most perfect when the mind attends to, or reflects on, knowledge of the most perfect Being."<sup>10</sup> Spinoza settles that this task is not easy. First, because Nature is rarely investigated in a correct order; second, because it is necessary to make accurate distinctions in doing this and, finally, because there are many factors that distract an individual in the way of knowledge.

As a conclusion, "the Method must, first, show how to distinguish a true idea from all other perceptions, and to restrain the mind from those other perceptions; second, teach rules so that we may perceive things unknown according to such standard; third,

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<sup>5</sup> E. Curley, The Collected Works of Spinoza. Vol. I, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985) pp3-45.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.10.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.11.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p19.

establish an order, so that we do not become weary with trifles. When we came to know this Method, we saw, fourth, that it will be most perfect when we have the idea of the most perfect Being."<sup>11</sup>

As our intention is to learn from Nature and to reach the essence through the phenomenon, we must follow the method that allows us to move in this direction: this method is Phenomenology.

3. The Phenomenological Method. To understand phenomenology it is significant to clarify, first, the meaning of the word "phenomenon." Etymologically it means "which appears," that is, the appearance. However, we cannot see that phenomenon unless it appears with light. In conclusion, the phenomenon is that "which reveals itself with light." From this definition of phenomenon many theories have been proposed. Some philosophers do not believe in phenomenon as reality; others believe that it is **the only** reality. Husserl, for example, thinks that it is at the same time appearance and reality. Moreover, it constitutes the fundamental star to reach the essence and the Idea. Phenomenology is, thus, the science of phenomenon and its methodology is its transcendence.

The principal purpose of phenomenology is to provide a unified theory of science and knowledge. To do this, it needs a logical method following causality principles. If the method is correct, every step will be successful in arriving at the goal. For this reason the goal is as important as the method itself. There is no separation between method and principles to the "heraclitean flow" which unifies not only the subject but also the way of knowledge.

Phenomenology is, first, the science of description, but at the same time it is a formal science based on logical laws. Even though it deals with phenomena and perceptions, it is not a psychological approach since its subject is beyond the individual's mind. Phenomenology does not deal with real events but with the logical formulation of those events. However,, its method begins with phenomenon and, even more, it affirms the phenomenon as existent. To do this it uses the "epoche" or suspension of judgment. It is, in a certain way, an absolute positivism because of its beginning only in the phenomenon. The suspension of judgment implies neither believing in the world, or in the reality perceived or in us as individuals. Once we reach this point we arrive to the nucleus where the consciousness stands, therefore, we cannot deny the existence of that consciousness. To pass from one step to another we have to use a process of reduction: first "eidetic" until reaching the essence, and then transcendental. With the transcendental reduction the derivative method ends and the cognitive process takes place, which goes in the opposite direction.

Once we have reached the Idea through the phenomenon, we have to affirm the existence of the phenomenon through the Idea. In addition to the cognitive process, we

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<sup>11</sup> E. Curley, The Collected Works of Spinoza. Vol. I, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985) p 22.

have to use intuition, a way of knowledge that links the phenomenon and the Idea and allows us to understand both immediately. up to this point we have followed different processes of knowledge and used a formal method. Moreover, an individual can transform the reality, the phenomenon, closing the circle of theory-practice and understanding-transforming. In conclusion, the phenomenological method begins in the phenomenon, uses logical laws to grasp the essence and Idea, and returns to the phenomenon to transform its reality.

As our purpose is to begin our investigation with things that appear to us, in this case a landscape, and as we are interested in reaching something more profound than appearance, we shall follow this method as the best process of knowledge.

We can turn now to our previous landscape and begin our study. It is necessary to remember, at this point, that we are asking if the landscape could have another meaning besides an aesthetic one. We were concerned with finding something deeper and more essential than the elements which we are contemplating. For this reason and from what we have introduced in the first section, we shall use different steps of phenomenological approach.

## II. A Practical Survey

1. The derivative Process. A landscape is formed by physical elements. In the case that we are considering, these elements are a tree and a mountain. Moreover, we can see how these elements maintain between them a determinate relationship: the tree is on the mountain. Initially, we could think that the mountain is a stronger element than the tree because it is formed by rock. But a deeper insight will show us that the tree has been able to go through the rock and emerge on it. In this case a weaker element has surpassed a stronger one. This is one of the dialectics laws: strength becomes weakness and vice versa. The process has originated because of the internal qualities of the tree and the mountain. Another dialectic process occurs when both elements change their spatial relations. At the moment of our contemplation, the tree is on the mountain but, with the passage of time, the tree will be destroyed by erosion and its elements will return to the earth. Moreover, before emerging on the mountain, the tree's roots were inside. We have to consider, therefore, another dialectic law: things that are above are below and vice versa.

Let us consider in which step of the method we are now. We have realized the existence of some physical elements and their interrelation. Due precisely to this interrelation we can see an image, that is, a **phenomenon**. The first thing that we observe of the elements is their order, and this order is the origin of the image.

The image is the representation of a thing, the first information that we possess of the external world. The perception of this image through the senses is the first knowledge that we have. This perception has occurred in the **man** and it is time to ask the question again: is this the end of the process, or is there another step? To answer this question it is necessary to establish a link between senses and knowledge, and we know



well that man is not only able to perceive reality but also to think about that reality. It is precisely due to this link between perception and concept that language was born.

In the conceptual image, man adds to image something fundamental: the concept. When we describe an image, we use words for this description, words that refer to this concrete thing, and accordingly, are full of meaning. A concept, thus, is not a mere union of words without sense but, on the contrary, words with a concrete meaning whose correlation lies in the thing. The material object, which we have perceived through our senses, becomes enriched by the concept. The formal object and the image are transformed, by parallel process, in "expressed" image. We would ask, at this point, if this image is the expression artificially. But, if we are moving through the process of knowledge step by step, and we use the correct sequence, each step will include the previous one. To put it differently, if the beginning and method are correct, we will have a correct end.

The image that we were contemplating at the beginning is, thus, enriched with the concept of **development** or **gradual progress**, concept that is not arbitrary but based in its intrinsic elements as well as in its dialectic relation with the other elements of the landscape. A slow evolution allows the tree to be well rooted; therefore, it is ver difficult to destroy it. Moreover, as it has taken a long time to grow, its image has been there for a long time too. What does this fact mean? One of the laws of perception is repetition, that is, the more vivid and persistent an image is, the more it appears to us. The same law can be applied to the process of thinking known in neurophysiology as "neuronal modulation." In conclusion, not only does the image of the tree remain for a long time in the senses and knowledge of all men who contemplate it, but its image will also be indestructible. It is possible that a time will come in which the tree will not be there any longer, but its image will remain in one place: the soul of the man.

This is the meaning of gradual progress, the concept of indestructibility, the concept of how powerful the constant and progressive development is. Up to this point we possess the image, we understand its dialectic relations and we have enriched it with the concept. But it is not the last step. We have to follow the analytical way until we arrive to the limits of the human world. The next step is the symbol.

The symbol constitutes the limit between the human and the transcendental world. It is a specific kind of sign whose characteristics can only be apprehended in a practical way. At the same time, as it is in contact with the transcendental world, its reality shows us something more essential than the pure sign. For this reason, symbols are more related with sociology and religion. Many symbols have a universal meaning and can be understood by different peoples and civilizations, no matter how far apart in space or time. One of the most significant functions of symbols is to allow us to understand the unity that underlies multiplicity. In the same way, it is the key to reach the essence.

The symbol is a link between conscious and unconscious and through its simplicity we are able to grasp the unintelligible. The symbol expresses universal

truths, and for this reason it always remains and constitutes a knowledge beyond space and time.

The tree on the mountain is the symbol of the interrelation between the human and the divine world. The mountain is earth and its characteristics are: firmness, strength and duration. It symbolizes also height and it is well known that the highest mountains have always been considered the god's dwellings. The mountains' peaks are in direct contact with heaven and receive from it the spirit. The tree represents at the same time a material and spiritual principle. It is both smoothness because its branches are bent by the wind and strength because it can grow through the earth. In many religions man has been considered as an inverted tree receiving the spirit through his natural root: the heaven. Tree and mountain, in conclusion, have become two of the most important natural symbols.

We now have to transcend the human world. Until now the process of abstraction has been made by successive steps whose beginnings lie in the material world. From now on we have to use eidetic reduction to grasp the essence. Essence or substance means, as we have seen before, something that is underlying the accidents and it also means something that does not need anything more to exist. Attributes or accidents can change but substance always stands. In our landscape the tree and the mountain can disappear but the inner principle which made their existence possible, that is, the movement or change, will never perish. We no longer have the image or the symbol but we have its essential principle.

The next step consists of trying to understand the interrelation and order of essences. The difference between the Greek words "cosmos" and "chaos" lies precisely in the concept of order. The cosmos is ordered according to laws, which make possible the relation and the hierarchy. Matter has a state of polarity without which it could not exist. The tension between polarities makes the existence possible, and this tension is expressed in the laws of change. These laws are responsible, thus, for the different expressions of matter. Under substances, a formal law remains and becomes a universal principle.

Because the characteristic of law consists in this formal principle, there are no exceptions. For this reason, man can create human and moral laws, and the concordance between human and universal laws will determine the harmony. When man's action are in equilibrium with universal laws, he will be able to arrive to the last step: the Idea.

Let us return again to our landscape. Perhaps one day the mountain will become plain and the tree will disappear from the surface of the earth. Nevertheless, both were created from a first seed whose principle we can only grasp by using the same reductive process mentioned before. However, the reduction is not eidetic now but rather transcendental. Accordingly, at the end of this process we shall find the substance of substances: "the First Substance, named Spirit or God.

2. The Cognitive Process. We have seen how through a reductive process, first essential and later transcendental, we have reached the First Principle. Now it is necessary to go in the opposite direction. We began with the world and questioned this world through different processes until we reached the Idea. The affirmation of Idea from world will allow us to invert the direction, that is, to affirm the world from the Idea.

From here and through a preceding movement, all things will be affirmed because the end of a way necessitates its beginning. The Idea, therefore, will appear to us as synthetic knowledge and will make freedom possible. Because, when man understands the seed, he has power over destiny. Through derivative knowledge we are able to know the past, and with the synthetic knowledge we shall know the laws of the future.

To reach this kind of knowledge we have to be ready for it. No one will have the key to the future if he is greedy. On the contrary, we must be in "emptiness" and must renounce all knowledge to arrive at this point. Once there, we can pursue the last kind of knowledge: the Intuition.

Through intuition we have an exact and instantaneous knowledge. The Idea appears to us without intermediaries and we know the past, present and future at the same time. A final condition is also necessary now: the confidence in this kind of knowledge. It is the inexpressible sensation that we experience when contemplating a magnificent landscape or a small flower: the sensation that we are face to face with the divine.

3. The Creative Process. Man is the creator. Human freedom is manifested precisely through actions. When man has the secret of knowledge he is able to transform in a creative way not only the material but also the human and transcendental world. If we return to our landscape we see that we have different possibilities of action. First, we can cut the tree to make wood, we can excavate the mountain to make a tunnel or even destroy its natural elements. Second, we can contemplate aesthetically the landscape and enjoy its beauty. Finally, we can learn from it. This learning has an ultimate meaning: the goodness. All process of knowledge must be directed to help human beings. Man can transform the reality through science, art or philosophy but there is a virtue that must be above everything else: ethics. Goodness is the only virtue through which man can be in harmony with himself, other human beings and Nature. And it is only through virtue that man can contemplate the First Substance: God.

### III. Conclusion

Since in this way man comes to resemble heaven and earth, he is not in conflict with them.  
His wisdom embraces all things, and his Tao brings order into the whole world; therefore he does not err.  
He is active everywhere but does not let himself be carried away. He rejoices in heaven and has knowledge of fate, therefore he is free of care. He is content with his circumstances and genuine in his kindness, therefore he can practice love.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The I Ching, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977) p.295.

