
Honoring Nature All the Way Down

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There are two kinds of naturalists. The first, whom I'll call 'vanilla' naturalists, take as foundational our current scientifically derived understandings of nature—understandings that are expected to deepen and occasionally reverse with further inquiry.

The second, whom I'll call 'religious' naturalists, even though they may not so self-describe, go on to explore the interpretive/spiritual/ethical implications of these understandings. A few religious naturalists, including myself, have written articles/books/blogs that describe our explorations. Lisa Sideris has amalgamated our various approaches into a category she calls the 'New Genesis'—a category that she then critiques.

The New Genesis category is apt in the sense that all of us are excited about the potential of these understandings for existential and moral orientation, and most of Sideris's quotes lift up that common enthusiasm. As my understanding is that her article is the distillation of a forthcoming book, I hope that the book includes as well the contexts and trajectories in which those quotes are embedded; I for one found myself saying, 'But but but you need to add the next sentence/paragraph to convey my meaning!' That said, I will focus my commentary on her concerns about this category and not on my concerns about how she has constructed the category.

'One of my central claims', she writes in the beginning and develops at several points in the article, 'is that these narratives tend to encourage awe and wonder at scientific information and expert knowledge as that which is most "real", over and above direct encounters with the natural

world... Everyday experiences and encounters with the natural world—encounters not filtered through scientific analysis and explanation—are likely to be devalued in this worldview’ (p. 136).

As near as I can tell, this concern is seeded by Dawkins’s exhortations in *Unweaving the Rainbow* (1998) and *The Magic of Reality* (2011) to find beauty in how rainbows work and by his hope that poets will celebrate these understandings. Although he exercises his expected bah-humbuggery about concepts like the rainbow as a sign from God to Noah, I find nothing in either book to suggest that he thinks that everyday experiences of nature are devalued by this knowledge. Rather, he proposes that these experiences are enhanced by the scientific understandings that illuminate them, a sentiment that I am quite sure is shared by all ‘New Genesis’ writers. Indeed, he is hardly the first to make this suggestion. Physicist Richard Feynman’s ‘Ode to a Flower’, articulated in 1981 and recently animated, is a lovely example.¹

As an aside, I would point out that ‘everyday human experiences and encounters with the natural world’ are often not as salubrious as Sideris suggests. As I develop at the close of Chapter 5 in *Sacred Depths of Nature* (1998: 74) and in *Vertical and Horizontal Transcendence* (2001: 383-93), humans have a strong tendency to anthropomorphize nature, to value what is perceived as charismatic or important for their needs, and to arrange nature to conform to their aesthetic sensibilities, creating formal gardens and highway turnouts for scenic landscape and ocean views. Of course, nature is in fact embedded in a complex set of dynamics and builds on a complex history, much of which has little if anything to do with humans. To understand these dynamics and history is to honor nature, to know nature all the way down.

Importantly, Sideris understands this concept of complexity:

To be clear: my contention is not that scientific information is irrelevant or unimportant to the project of valuing and preserving nature or in the effort to cultivate wonder generally. On the contrary, I believe science to be indispensable for guiding and informing our ethical interventions in the natural world. Seen in its proper perspective, science may help to underwrite a sense of humility and wonder at vast and ancient processes of which human beings are a small part. Nor do I wish to discount the importance of scientific discoveries in realms inaccessible to our unaided senses (p. 148).

Her concerns, then, keep landing on the same target: scientific hubris. Immediately following the above affirmation, she writes:

1. See online at: <http://vimeo.com/55874553>.

I do, however, reject the claim—a claim that finds support in some iterations of the New Genesis—that science enables alignment with Reality (with a capital ‘R’) and an ultimate encounter with Truth (with a capital ‘T’). [I know of no example in which a New Genesis writer has capitalized these nouns.] But the elevation of science to the role of a sacred new mythology or *virtually self-sufficient normative guide* [I know of no such suggestion in New Genesis writings] is problematic in itself and *especially* as a starting point for affective and effective environmental engagement. *Moreover, scientific religiosity of the sort found in some of these narratives encourages an apotheosis of scientists and the scientific endeavor* (p. 149, italics added except ‘especially’).

Sideris disparages the mediation of ‘expert knowledge’, ‘the privileging of scientific information’, the ‘hubristic ambitions’ of the New Genesis writers in ‘redirecting our sense of awe and wonder toward the scientific enterprise and its quest for totalizing knowledge—and, potentially, away from the natural world itself’ (p. 143). Indeed, she wonders ‘who can be counted on to keep a critical and watchful eye on science?’ (p. 143).

Sideris, and she is hardly alone here, is conflating the practice of science and the understandings generated by scientific inquiry. Science, in fact, is a method of inquiry, one that is being applied to all aspects of the universe, from Big-Bang origins to human origins to political history. Persons who engage in these investigations are called natural and social scientists. The results of these studies, themselves subject to continuous challenge and refinement, then become a body of knowledge, in which the scientist herself/himself becomes totally irrelevant. Sure, we have our scientist heroes and their biographies, but the game-changing insights of a Darwin or Einstein were founded on countless previous observations and have generated countless others, all from scientists without apotheosis fantasies. Their reward, and it is an exhilarating one, is making the (very occasional) discovery that deepens our understanding of nature.

The Epic of Evolution and its synonyms, therefore, are not science or Science. They are narratives that are emerging from scientific discoveries about the natural world. Scientists have recently been pulling aside the stage curtain, but the play itself has been in progress for 13.8 billion years, with no scientist or Science in sight. Moreover, if science education were not in the abysmal condition that it currently is, these core understandings would not be a matter of ‘expert knowledge’ and ‘privileged information’ but rather as foundational as reading and math.

Sideris moves in this direction but then circles back to her core ‘scientism’ critique when she writes:

I accept that it is problematic to assert that our sensory experiences constitute an unmediated encounter with nature; nevertheless, *science* is

not the same thing as *nature*, and to study the former is not to experience the latter... It estranges us from what we experience as real, meaningful, and beautiful. Why attach ourselves to this world of illusion?' (p. 147, italics original).

In fact, and I'm sure the other 'New Genesis' writers are with me here, when I encounter a gorgeous sunset, I don't immediately flip to nuclear fusions and the principles of diffraction. Sure, I can go there (and maybe Dawkins goes there more quickly), and sometimes I do. But, as noted earlier, such knowledge *enhances* the reality, meaning, and beauty of the sunset that I am taking in with my sensory, emotional, and spiritual self. It does not get in the way. Just as when I meet an attractive man, and my face flushes and heart rate increases, I do not start thinking about my oxytocin and vasopressin levels. I am feeling how attractive I find him.

Sideris concludes with a rather startling proposal:

Might the stories that [the scientific worldview] generates be amended so as to lessen their seemingly pernicious implications and hegemonic ambitions?... Doing so would lessen concerns about these stories as metanarratives that displace or pronounce false all rival stories, and that deride other ways of knowing and experiencing our world. Many of the more hubristic implications of the New Genesis might be mitigated by jettisoning the claim that a comprehensive, unified body of scientific knowledge—consilient integration—undergirds the story.

If there's a rule to being a vanilla or religious naturalist, it's that one adopts the science-based worldview currently offered and does not cherry-pick to find features of the story that support his/her preferred view of nature. To 'jettison claims' is to suggest that an amended version has more validity. Who decides which implications are pernicious? What would Sideris's version be? She apparently finds the vastness of the universe to be alienating. Would she leave that part out?

A few years ago I did an interview with a writer during which we touched on human origins. A few weeks later the writer phoned to tell me that when she went home that evening, she collapsed in existential crisis, sobbing in her husband's arms: 'I'm an ape! I'm an ape!' But, she was eager to tell me, once past that, she was finding herself feeling far more deeply embedded in the natural world, far more committed to its flourishing.

I'll close by addressing Sideris's final sentences: 'Of course, anyone who finds the story compelling, fulfilling, and satisfying as a new myth should be free to adopt it. My point is that I see no reason that anyone—much less everyone—*ought* to adopt it' (pp. 151-52, italics original).

A possible referent here may be my suggestion in *The Sacred Depths of Nature* that such an orientation is best suited to address global issues.

Here is the full text of that suggestion, which I believe to be far more nuanced than Sideris implies.

Our global conversions on these topics [ethnic cleansing, fossil fuels, habitat preservation, human rights, hunger, infectious disease, nuclear weapons, oceans, pollution, population] are, by definition, cacophonies of national, cultural, and religious self-interest... My agenda for this book is to outline the foundations for such a planetary ethic, an ethic that would make no claim to supplant existing traditions but would seek to coexist with them, informing our global concerns while we continue to orient our daily lives in our cultural and religious contexts... I will not presume to suggest what this ethos might look like. Its articulation must be a global project. But I am convinced that the project can be undertaken only if we all experience a solemn gratitude that we exist at all, share a reverence for how life works, and acknowledge a deep and complex imperative that life continue... A global ethic must be anchored both in an understanding of human nature and an understanding of the rest of Nature. This, I believe, can be achieved if we start out with the same perspective on how Nature is put together, and how human nature flows forth from whence we came (Goodenough 1998: xv-xviii).

References

- Dawkins, Richard. 1998. *Unweaving the Rainbow* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin).
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