On the Spiritual Understanding of Nature

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I

Some years ago I wrote a paper which I called "Meditations at the Edge of Askja" where I tried to explain some of the thoughts that Askja, a volcano in Iceland, had awakened in me after my first visit there in 1994. When I was walking back from Askja, some very speculative questions were growing in my mind: How do totalities, self-contained wholes, come to be, and what kind of totalities are there? And how do connections come to be, and what kinds of connections are there?[1] Some months later, after having spent some months in Paris carrying with me a stone from Askja, I started reflecting upon my encounter with Askja and comparing it to my experience of the city of Paris.

Coming to Askja was for me like coming to earth for the first time and discovering myself as an earthling: a being whose very existence depends on the earth, a being who can only be itself by relating to this strange, overwhelming and fascinating totality, which is already there and forms an independent, objective, natural world. Askja symbolized for me an "objective reality, independent of all thought, belief and expression, independent of human existence" (p.21). Askja, I said, "is the earth itself as it was, is, and will be, for as long as this planet continues to orbit in space, whatever we do and whether or not we are here on this earth. Askja was formed, the earth was formed, long before we were created. And Askja will be here long after we are gone." (p.21) For me it was suddenly evident that everything else, every totality or connection that I could discover or imagine,

[1] These questions can clearly be attached to everything we encountered, not only to visible phenomenon like a volcano or a man-made phenomenon like a city or a house, but also to invisible beings like a state or a nation or the self that each of us carries with him or her

could only be a reality because of its relation to the natural reality which Askja symbolized so marvellously. By contrast Paris, that fascinating city, was a man-made totality of an entirely different kind, but dependent upon the existence of nature as an autonomous and independent reality.

My thesis in the former paper – if one can call it a thesis – was, in short, that to be "an earthling is to feel one's life to be bound to the earth, or deriving from it, to feel the earth to be the fundamental premise of one's life." I argued for this thesis in the following way: "I am I, you are you, and we are we because we place ourselves, are and cannot be what we are except in the face of Askja (or other, comparable, symbol of the earth), to which we can turn again and again, if not in actuality, then in our thoughts. We stand upon the earth – build, work, and destroy it, if it comes to that – because we are born to the earth and can only find ourselves in relation to it, in the light of it or in its embrace. The earth is thus the beginning and the end of all our feeling for reality as a unified totality, and thus of all our feeling for ourselves as inhabitants of the world. The earth is the premise of our being ourselves, of our existing together and being aware of ourselves." (p.21-23)

In the paper I am referring to, my main aim was to illustrate this spiritual understanding of the earth in all its natural glory as an independent reality into which we are born and with which we engage in a complex relationship (see p. 27). I call this understanding "spiritual" because it has to do with our feelings and our sense of value, of belonging to and being separated from, of being afraid and being fascinated. It is an understanding that has to do with religion rather than science, magic rather than technology. Its religious connotation does not make it any the less important. On the contrary, it reveals a problem which is not primarily a scholarly problem, but concerns the most basic connections of the mind to

reality, and all the uncertainty and insecurity that pertain to our relations as sentient and reflecting beings to natural reality itself.

In the paper I am now presenting to you I want to explore some aspects of this spiritual understanding of nature, which I tried to illustrate in the former paper. Such an understanding does not of course replace the scientific understanding of nature to which we are all accustomed and which is the basis for our technological powers. But it may help us to see and to think about issues that we might otherwise overlook, issues that concern how we are to realize the basic values and ultimate goals of our existence. It is the function of civilisation, or if you like, of culture, of politics and of economics, to secure these values and goals. But a civilisation may also conceal the issues that need to be dealt with, and the question that confronts humanity now is whether we recognize and work toward what ultimately matters and whether we may have to change radically the ways in which we are developing our civilisation.

One way of criticizing our present civilisation is to say that it has made the value of *efficiency*, which pertains to certain means that are at our disposal, into an ultimate value, that is to say into a sacred value, and that this *spiritual* error, if I may call it that, is leading us astray. This criticism, which we can find in the writings of many thinkers of the last century, among them Heidegger and Wittgenstein, must certainly be taken seriously. But if this error is to be corrected we need to develop a proper understanding of the reality of which we are a part and which may enable us to develop more appropriate relations to our fellow beings and to the world as a whole. I believe that both Heidegger and Wittgenstein. along with many other scholars, poets and philosophers, contributed significantly to such an understanding—a spiritual understanding. One of their lessons is that we

should not expect to find solutions to our existential worries in a grandiose theory but rather in a humble way of reflecting upon our own experience and what others can tell us about their experience of the world.

II

Bearing this in mind, let us return to the experience of Askja with the help of another story of a first encounter with that magnificent volcano. In the year 1923 an Icelandic scientist, Pálmi Hannesson, came to Askja for the first time. I discovered his account of his first encounter with Askja by chance, only a few months ago. Hannesson speaks of walking towards Askja, enjoying the wonderful views of the Icelandic highlands, when we enter his adventure:

"After a short while I arrived at the edge of a sheer cliff and saw Askja lying before me —or was it I who lay before Askja? At my first glimpse, I had to look away. Nothing like that has happened to me before or since, to be struck dumb by landscape. But there is some magic attached to Askja, some awesome, disturbing force that took me unawares and that I could not at first withstand, there in my solitude. I have never seen anything as astonishing or powerful. It was as if the magnificent view which I had enjoyed just a moment before had been erased from my mind, and with the terror of animate flesh, I was confronted by this awesome wonder of inanimate nature. There is no hope of describing Askja in any meaningful way. Who can describe a great work of art? Words and images are like the mere clanging of metal or the beating of a bell. And the same applies to any attempt to describe Askja."

"Eftir stutta stund bar mig fram á þverhnípta hamrabrún, og þá sá ég hana fyrir fótum mér, – eða var það ég, sem lá fyrir fótum hennar? Þegar ég renndi augum fyrsta sinni yfir Öskju, varð mér það að líta undan. Slíkt hefur aldrei hent mig í annan tíma, að verða að gjalti fyrir landslagi. En yfir Öskju hvílir einhver kynngi, einhver ögrandi ægikraftur, sem ég varaði mig ekki á og stóðst því ekki í fyrstu þarna í einverunni. Aldrei hef ég séð neitt jafnfurðulegt og magnað. Hið stórbrotna útsýni, sem ég hafði notið litlu áður, var sem þurrkað burt úr vitund minni, og með ugg hins lifandi holds

stóð ég frammi fyrir þessu ægilega furðuverki dauðrar náttúru. Þið megið ekki ætlast til þess, að ég geti lýst Öskju, svo vel sé. Hver getur lýst miklu listaverki? Orð og eftirmyndir verða jafnan sem hljómandi málmur og hvellandi bjalla. Og líkt er um Öskju farið."[2]

Two essential elements are clear in this account. The first is the overwhelming impression made by Askja upon the mind of the perceiver: He has to look away, he cannot face this reality. He finds himself "struck dumb" [in fact the metaphore is melting], he was unprepared and had no defense against the awesome, disturbing force of Askja. Everything else fades away and he is experiencing the "terror of animate flesh" ["the fear of the living flesh"] in face of this mysterious and tremendous power of "inanimate nature". The second aspect is his "speechlessness": He is deprived of the power to describe or explain what he is discovering, but nevertheless tries to say something.

What Pálmi Hannesson is telling us about is an experience of what Rudolf Otto has described in his book, *The Idea of the Holy*, as the experience of the *numinous*.[3] "Numinous" is a word coined by Otto in order to denote what we take to be "holy" or "sacred", but without any ethical or rational connotation. The numinous is a specific category of value which can only be encountered in a special experience that gives rise to a unique state of mind: "This mental state is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other; and therefore, like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot strictly be defined"[4]. Otto's book,

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[2] *Landið okkar*, bls. 109.

[3] A colleague and friend, Mikael M. Karlsson, who translated *Meditations at the Edge of Askja* into English, pointed out to me that the experience I described in that text had certain similarities to what Rudolf Otto was discussing in his book as the experience of the numinous. The similarities are even more striking when it comes to Hannesson's account of his experience of coming to Askja.

[4] *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 7

which was first published in English in 1923[5] (the year that Hannesson visited Askja!), is an attempt to discuss and clarify the nature of the numinous "by means of the special way in which it is reflected in the mind in terms of feeling" (p.12).[6] In this experience we are, according to Otto, "dealing with something for which there is only one appropriate expression 'mysterium tremendum'" (p.12).[7] He distinguishes between three basic elements in such an experience. First is the element of Awefulness, which is the tremor, the fear, the dread, or the "symptom of 'creeping flesh'". (p.16) The "Wrath of Yahweh" in the Old Testament has something to do with this. "There is something very baffling in the way in which [the "Wrath of Yahweh"] 'is kindled' and manifested. It is, as has been well said, 'like a hidden force of nature', like stored-up electricity, discharging itself upon anyone who comes too near" (p. 18). The second element, closely connected to the first, is that of 'Overpoweringness' or what Otto names *majestas*. It is the feeling of an absolute dependency: "Thus, in contrast to 'the overpowering' of which we are conscious as an object over against the self, there is the feeling of one's own submergence, of being but 'dust and ashes' and nothingness" (p. 20). The third element is that of the "energy" or urgency of the numinous object; this element is already involved in those of *tremendum* and *majestas*. Everywhere it "clothes itself in symbolical

[5] The first edition in German is from 1917.

[6] The feeling which Otto describes and discusses at length is that of dependence: "It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures" (p. 10).

[7] Otto describes it in the following way: "The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its 'profane', non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsion, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of–whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery inexpressible and above all creatures" (pp.12-13).

expressions–vitality, passion, emotional temper, will, force, movement, excitement, activity, impetus" (p. 23).[8]

For Otto the category of the Holy or the numinous object is purely *a priori* category in the Kantian sense. It is neither a supra-natural object nor can it be reduced to sense-experience or said to be evolved from some sort of sense-perception (see p. 112). "It issues from the deepest foundations of cognitive apprehension that the soul possesses, and, though it of course comes into being in and amid the sensory data and empirical material of the natural world and cannot anticipate or dispense with those, yet it does not arise *out* of them, but only *by their means*" (p. 113).

To come back to Hannesson's experience of Askja, and to mine as well, it is obvious that both these personal experiences bear all the marks of "numinous consciousness" as if Askja had been an occasion for us to discover the numinous object. Askja was, to use Otto's terms, "the sensory data and empirical material of the natural world" by means of which we were filled with the emotion of the numinous. Askja had awakened in us "a numinous consciousness" which, according to Otto, points to "a hidden substantive source, from which the religious ideas and feelings are formed, which lies in the mind independently of sense-experience" (p. 114).

Now my question is: What lessons concerning our understanding of nature and of our relationship with Earth as our home in the natural world

[8] According to Otto this aspect of the numinous, the element of energy, "reappears in Fichte's speculations on the Absolute as the gigantic, never-resting, active world-stress, and in Schopenhauer's daemonic 'Will'" (p. 24). Then Otto makes a remark which gives us an important indication about his way of thinking: "At the same time both these writers are guilty of the same error that is already found in the myth; they transfer 'natural' attributes, which ought only to be used as 'ideograms' for what is itself properly beyond utterance, to the non-rational as real qualifications of it, and they mistake symbolic expressions of feelings for adequate concepts upon which a 'scientific' structure of knowledge may be based" (p.24) The numinous or the Holy object which the mind discovers as "the mysterium tremendum" is not to be explained by a metaphysical theory about a supreme power that some philosophers may imagine as that to which everything in the universe must ultimately relate.

can be drawn from this experience of the numinous awakened by the volcano Askja?

I will proceed from the abstract to the concrete and start with a reflection about experience in general and the way in which it connects with reality, then proceed to a reflection on the experience of the numinous as such and what it means to/for our understanding of reality, and finally discuss the meaning of the specific experience of Askja for our actual understanding of Nature and Earth.

III

In order to make clear to ourselves what experience means for us I think it may be useful to take into account what Hegel has in mind when he discusses the concept of experience in the introduction to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[9] Hegel explains in this introduction how he understands the logic implicit in the process by which we gain experience of the world and of ourselves. The experience he has in mind is not only sense-perception, although he sees that as the very beginning of the process of human experience. The experience Hegel is dealing with is that of the conscious being that is at the same time conscious of the reality outside itself and of its own internal reality. In short, the process of experience that Hegel describes implies two steps. The first one is the discovery of something that exists outside of, and independently of, our consciousness; the second step is the arrival on the scene of a new object, created by the encounter of human consciousness with the first object. The first object, which existed only in itself and independently of our consciousness, still exists, of course, in itself but now also for our consciousness.

[9] I am inspired in this by Heidegger's paper, "Hegel and his concept of experience".

Hegel points out that there is a certain ambiguity here concerning the truth. Our consciousness has two objects: the reality which is there and the reality which is there for consciousness. Now the second object is apparently only the knowledge we have of the first object. According to our ordinary understanding of experience, we gain this knowledge by correcting an imperfect notion we had beforehand of the first object. But what we do not realize, Hegel remarks, is that the encounter transforms both our consciousness and the first object and generates a second object for our consciousness, namely experience itself as a unity of what is out there and what is in our mind. So when we are dealing with our own personal experience we are always wondering which part is determined by external factors and which by our own mind. For Hegel, we should approach experience itself as a creative process, a process in which new objects for our consciousness are constantly being formed. That allows for new relations between the world and ourselves and thus for a new understanding of reality. It is thus that we can understand the meaning of what we experience. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the story of how new objects, ever richer in meanings, come on the scene, starting with the first objects of sensation here and now and ending with the concept of Absolute knowledge as an object for our consciousness to reflect upon (and passing through interesting stages of experience where objects conveyed by concepts of self and reason play a major role in organizing our thinking about reality).

To take an example from our previous discussion of the numinous, it is clear that the numinous does not exist either in nature or in the mind but is brought into reality by their encounter with one another, under special circumstances. But in our ordinary way of thinking we have a tendency to place the numinous outside our consciousness, in a reality that is either natural or supra-natural. To do that we need a metaphysical theory about Nature and what may lie beyond it to explain the position of the numinous

(Otto mentions Fichte's and Schopenhauer's theories). But there is also another way of locating the numinous, namely by placing it among the pure *a priori* categories of the transcendental mind which Kant considered to be the ultimate conditions of possibility for all experience. The first option is some kind of realism or naturalism which we all have a natural tendency to follow. The second option is a transcendental idealism which owes much to Plato, and this is the one that Otto favors.

The third option is the one that Hegel opened up for us in his *Phenomenology*, i.e. that of understanding the numinous, and all other symbols or expressions of our experience, as objects that owe their existence to our real encounters in the world as conscious beings. Following this option, we have to learn to approach and understand reality as the encounter of consciousness and the world (which initially means the natural world or simply nature). This encounter embraces all relations or connections where mind and nature meet in fact. But that does not mean that all encounters are equivalent. On the contrary, if *experience* teaches us anything it is that there is a difference between one encounter and the next. And if *reflection* or thinking teaches us anything it is that we can account for these differences in unforeseeable ways in our linguistic and symbolic expressions. I take our *reflective* capabilities to be closely related to our *creative* capabilities and to be unlimited in their capacity to produce things or ideas that make sense or that do not—or seem to us not to—make any sense. And what makes sense at one specific moment may not make any sense in other circumstances. But even though we, as conscious beings, are capable of producing an infinity of objects for our consciousness to rejoice in or get excited about, our real capacities to understand our experiences of the world are constrained by the cultural systems which have been created in order to ensure our spiritual and physical security.

Let me explain. We need three things to survive in the world. First, physical sustainance (shelter, food and security); second, institutions to organize our social relations, and, third, ideas to keep track of our thinking. Former generations have already established a variety of systems to guarantee the continuation of our species on earth: systems for the production and distribution of worldly goods, systems of governance and a division of powers, and systems of ideas which explain to us how and why things are as they are in the world.

Now these systems may serve their purpose well or badly, but the basic problem with them is that they come between our minds and the reality out there and may completely blind us to the extraordinary dimensions of the world that lies beyond all the systems we can possibly invent or imagine. It is as if these systems were put in place to protect us from reality itself by controlling and deciding in advance the meaning of our future experiences. So in order to set our mind free we must break away from these cultural systems in order to develop our own thinking and to experience the world and ourselves on the basis of our personal relations with reality.

IV

Here we come to the experience of the numinous, which is an experience that does not fit into any system of ideas but shows the superficiality and smallness of all such systems. Let us now reflect upon this experience as such, that is, without taking into account which specific external object gives rise to it or by what means it was brought about (for instance by drug).

From Otto's analysis it is clear that the numinous consciousness is not related to any specific external circumstances, and he sees the numinous rather as an extraordinary phenomenon or object which we may discover and experience in a great variety of situations. In fact there seems to be something about the world which makes it an occasion for us, at least from

time to time, to have the emotional experience of the numinous in the sense that Otto gave it, i.e. something sacred or holy but without any moral or rational content. For Otto this special emotion can only be brought about because in the depths of our soul we are endowed with the extraordinary capability to discover the numinous.[10] According to Otto we should think theoretically of the origin of the numinous as " 'pure reason' in the profoundest sense, which, because of the 'surpassingness' of its content, must be distinguished from both the pure theoretical and the pure practical reason of Kant, as something yet higher or deeper than they" (p. 114).

I am not going to dispute this Kantian way of thinking, but it seems to me much more interesting to concentrate on the fact that there is something disturbing in our relationship with reality; something which occasionally makes us experience the world as totally beyond all comprehension. The emotion of the numinous or, if you prefer, the numinous consciousness, is a clear revelation of this basic fact about our connection to reality, to the world and to ourselves. Of course, we do not usually dwell on this disturbing experience which people may experience and express quite differently. I have always found Albert Einstein's account of this experience very much to the point: "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed." I take it for granted that the different religions of the world offer various ways of articulating this spiritual understanding in order to make it possible for us to secure our mental ties to nature and between ourselves. The word "religion" comes from *re-lier*, to bind together, and this simple meaning is of utmost

[10] A bishop in Iceland was arguing at Easter that the idea of God is hidden in [lies within] every human soul, but that we have ourselves to make the effort of activating it in daily life and experience. Otto would not have called the numinous God although he was a Christian. It is rather a pure a priori category of reason in the Kantian sense. "The ideas of the numinous and the feelings that correspond to them are, quite as much as the rational ideas and feelings, absolutely 'pure', and the criteria which Kant suggests for the 'pure' concept and the 'pure' feeling of respect are most precisely applicable to them" (p. 112).

importance, it tells us what religion is all about. But if there is a need to bind together, or to relate to something, it is because there is *separation*: I discover myself separated from everything else, even from myself as a natural being.

V

This separation is reflected in the first idea that springs to mind when discovering Askja. It is what Hegel would call the absolute *exteriority* of nature to the human mind. This is what Otto describes as "the wholly other": "The truly 'mysterious' object is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently 'wholly other', whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb" (p. 28). We are–remember–coming to earth for the first time.

But this discovery of nature as a pure *exteriority* is at the same time a discovery of ourselves as a pure *interiority*, as beings aware of the world and aware of themselves as being aware, a discovery which Pascal describes in his *Pensées* in the following way: "Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature; but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself in order to crush him; a vapor, a drop of water, suffices to kill him. But even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which kills him, because he knows that he dies, and knows the advantage that the universe has over him; the universe knows nothing of this."[11]

Such is the first step of the experience in question. Nature–in this case the volcano Askja–imposes itself on us in such a way that we lose touch with all ordinary reality; we are struck dumb and become pure awareness.

[11] "L'homme n'est qu'un roseau, le plus faible de la nature, mais c'est un roseau pensant. Il ne faut pas que l'univers entier s'arme pour l'écraser; une vapeur, une goutte d'eau suffit pour le tuer. Mais quand l'univers l'écraserait, l'homme serait encore plus noble que ce qui le tue, parce qu'il sait qu'il meurt et l'avantage que l'univers a sur lui; l'univers n'en sait rien."

Let us now consider the second step which is the formation of the content of this experience, its proper meaning. This is, in Hegelian terms, the second object which is generated by the first encounter. This second object is the discovery that my very existence consists in connecting with nature, in establishing an adventurous and creative relationship with her, to recognize myself as an earthling. Now we come to the thesis which I mentioned at the beginning of my paper regarding what it is to be an earthling. It is "to feel one's life to be bound to the earth, or deriving from it, to feel the earth to be the fundamental premise of one's life." What matters is that we exist, each and every one of us, in our effort to relate to Nature, or more exactly to the powers which make Nature a reality for us. If this is true, then everything depends on how we–as perceiving, thinking and acting beings–establish and develop our personal relationships with the external world with its infinity of extraordinary things and beings and places.

VI

The question that still remains concerns the universal validity of this intimate relationship or, if you prefer, of the lesson that can be drawn from it. Is not the whole of my argument based upon romanticism, a desire to return to mother nature and forget all the ugliness and pollution of the so-called civilized world? And does not this romanticism originate in some kind of an irrational mysticism, which presupposes an unknown capability of the mind to relate to what is beyond human comprehension?

Now I could confess that I am not especially inclined to romanticism and that I do not believe in mysterious powers beyond human understanding although reason tells me that there must be powers in the universe that we do not know or understand. But I do not believe that the terms romanticism or mysticism are helpful to deal with what is at stake here. What is at stake is *understanding* the relationship we form in our

experience and in our mind with nature and how we succeed in clarifying this experience to ourselves and others. Let us look at an example from the perspective of a scientist.

In his book *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*[12], and his latest book *The Revenge of Gaia*, James Lovelock, a medical doctor and a scientist, explains splendidly how the metaphor of Gaia (originally a Greek goddess symbolizing Earth) helped him clarify his experience of our planet as a living being, that is as a self-regulating whole that obeys its own values, rules and goals. For Lovelock it is clear that we need to develop a new spiritual understanding of Nature in order to prepare for what is to come; and to follow him we have to develop a way of thinking in which we accept a vocabulary which is appropriate for our relationship to nature in our real experiences of it beyond what we can grasp in our conscious thought. "Important concepts like God or Gaia are not comprehensible in the limited space of our conscious minds, but they do have meaning in that inner part of our minds that is the seat of intuition. Our deep unconscious thoughts are not rationally constructed; they emerge fully formed as our conscience and an instinctive ability to distinguish good from evil" (p. 177).[13]

I believe that Lovelock is right and that we have a long way to go to develop and understand our relationship with Nature and ourselves. Our basic ideas, which mediate our experiences and help make sense of our encounter with Nature and with ourselves, are not rationally constructed like our technological devices. In fact we are moved by ideas much more than we move them.

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12 *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth,* Oxford University Press, 1979.

13 Lovelock believes that we still have a long way to go to learn to establish a proper relationship and understanding of the Earth as a living, self-regulating system: "Our religions have not yet given us the rules and the guidance for our relationship with Gaia. The humanist concept of sustainable development and the Christian concept of stewardship are flawed by unconscious hubris. We have neither the knowledge nor the capacity to be stewards or developers of the Earth than are goats to be gardeners." *The Revenge of Gaia*, p. 176.

At the beginning of this paper I reminded you of the idea of *efficiency* which our present civilisation has elevated to a supreme value. One might say that the economic system of the world thrives on more and more efficiency in producing and distributing worldly goods among people. At the same time it is the same economic system which, according to many scientists, is by its efficient manner of using our earthly resources affecting the self-regulating system of Earth in ways that may lead to a disaster for all living beings, not only for us humans that may be responsible for this.

One of the most important issues of our times may be how to formulate and implement ideas which would make the economic system of the world function well without going against the interests of the self-regulating Earth as a whole.

VII

I would like to end this paper by introducing an idea which might counter-balance the idea of *efficiency* as the regulative value of all our activities. The idea I have in mind has been with us from the beginning of this paper and it is, I believe, the main lesson to be learned from the experience of nature I have been discussing. It is the idea of *wholeness*. It seems to me that all the other ideas which have been mentioned in connection with this experience relate to this basic idea of *wholeness* or *totality*, if you prefer. The concepts of God and Gaia, to speak like Lovelock, are deeply connected to this idea. According to Christian belief, nature as a whole is God's creation and Gaia is obviously a metaphor which has the function of making us view and understand the Earth as a unique living Being, integrating all other organisms and having the function of safeguarding the conditions of life within its boundaries.

The first instance of the experience of Askja as a microcosm of Nature in its totality is that of the *separation* between ourselves and nature, the

second one is that of discovering our existence as consisting in our *relationship* with nature. The world of our experience is the totality of the connections that may develop between us, and the powers of nature, and we need concepts that help us cope with the infinite variety of connections that there may be. If the concept of *efficiency* may be helpful in order to multiply these connections and make use of everything we encounter, the concept of *wholeness* may be helpful in order to see the unity and the diversity of all these connections and which of them are for the good and which of them are harmful not only for us, but also for all living beings and the earth itself as our home in the universe. Of course, our capacity to understand totalities and connections is quite limited, but we can nevertheless put ourselves *to a certain extent* and *in imagination* in the place of all other creatures and even see things, as Spinoza said, *sub speciae aeternitatis*, from the perspective of eternity. God and Gaia are names for beings that we can imagine to have the most important perspectives which we need in order to view the reality of our experience as a whole. And we should never forget that our experiences are experiences of a reality which is forcing itself upon our mind and imposing the rules of the game much more effectively than we can ever do.

Our task must be to try to understand these rules and imagine all the possible moves that can be made in this game where life on Earth is at stake–a game which may be played by rules of which we do not have the slightest idea. But we have also invented our rules and one of them is that culture and nature should be kept apart, because they are different. On the one hand we have the visible reality which is offered to our senses, a volcano or a waterfall, on the other hand we have the invisible reality of meanings carried by our words, which name the realities we can perceive, their characteristics, our relations to them or whatever. *Nature* is the name for this reality out there independent of our consciousness, and *culture* is the

name for the reality we make ourselves with rational concepts as the basic tools for both technological and ideological constructions of our civilisation.

Apparently we live in two worlds: the world of Nature and the world of Culture. The idea of wholeness that I am forwarding defies this distinction. And all my arguments so far have been intended to show that this distinction does not make sense in the reality of our experience, which is an encounter between consciousness and nature and is the continued development of this encounter under new and unforeseeable circumstances. The question that arises continuously in the process of experience is: what is for the good and what is harmful for life; what is destructive, and what makes life flourish? As Wendell Berry says "the concept of health is rooted in the concept of wholeness. To be healthy is to be whole. The word *health* belongs to a family of words, a listing of which will suggest how far the consideration of health must carry us: *heal, whole, wholesome, hale, hallow, holy*. And so it is possible to give a definition to health that is positive and far more elaborate than that given to it by most medical doctors and the officers of public health"[14].

The task ahead is to elaborate the concept of wholeness in order to make us capable of overcoming the ideology of efficiency and prepare for a much healthier world, where we humans learn to make peace with the powers of Nature – in our minds and in our actions. And for this task, we all have to find our own Askja.

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Páll Skúlason

University of Iceland

[14] Wendell Berry: *The Unsettling of America*, p. 103.