


The Nature of "The Goodness Experience in Nature" A Phenomenological Inquiry Grounded in Eugene Gendlin's Ideas

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The Nature of "The Goodness Experience in Nature"
A Phenomenological Inquiry Grounded in Eugene Gendlin's Ideas

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Abstract

This research began from a vague sense of curiosity I had towards a commonly known phenomena: some environments have a definite positive effect on me, while others do not. In such wellness inspiring places, I become filled with a distinctive, bodily sense of well-being that sometimes lingers long after my visit, like an aftertaste. This experience may be described as similar to itself in the same way that satiety is similar to itself, irrespective of the food we ate. In my case, it was particularly pronounced in natural environments, although not exclusively so.

For many years I had not given this phenomena much thought, as I considered it a personal preference such as a personal-taste in music or art. Yet, as a practicing landscape architect, I have spent the major part of my career designing public spaces, aiming to provide the greatest possible sense of well-being to most users. Designing with such an intention I had always referred back to that particular sense and preference I knew from my own personal experience. I began to question what it is exactly that I do, as this design approach resulted with some success, in the form of parks such as "Kiryat Sefer" and "Sderot Hahaskala" in Tel Aviv, which have received wide acclaim for possessing a particular ephemeral quality: providing a sense of well-being.

It began to appear that that "personal taste" I applied in my professional practice, had a clear, sustainable effect on many people. Although I had tried many times to explain to myself and others what it is exactly that I and so many other professionals practiced intuitively, I could not but sense that there was a concrete knowledge I had, which I had no words or concepts to describe. I began to suspect that there was something universal about it. Just like everyone feels hunger and satiety, irrespective of age, gender, culture, etc, and despite the fact that different people like to eat different things. I assumed that that goodness-feeling-in-place may also contain features of a universal nature in a similar way.

I began this journey with a very practical purpose: to try to explain, or at least to describe the phenomena, in order to improve my ability to design good places. As I began to unravel some of the complex tangle of experience, the prior need to give terms and language to the pre-spoken experience of goodness-in-place became more prominent.

My wish to articulate this concrete, non-conceptualized knowledge was the driving force of this venture.

The notion that environment has something to do with well-being is by no means my discovery, nor its relatedness to natural environments. Previous empirical research has firmly established the positive effect of natural environments on a wide range of experiential and behavioral variables, and there are a

few theories that try to explain this phenomena. However, to the best of my knowledge, most of the research and theories have been restricted so far to classical "third person" science: i.e. searching for data that will help quantify well-being, or expose "some-thing" which is an independent property of natural environments that produces well-being. In my view these previous studies gave support to my intuition that there is some universal element to the experience. But since in my experience it was not exclusive to natural environments, I decided to focus my inquiry on *the experience* of well-being in natural environments itself.

The study of first person experience, referred to as "qualia" in consciousness research, is considered to be the "hard problem" of consciousness science. This is because science as a discipline has a clear model of how to go about explaining third person data, yet this model fails when attempting to define subjective experience, which defies objectification. Qualia cannot be reduced to data.

This limitation placed the study, from its very nascence, outside the boundary of the positivist scientific paradigm, and rooted it within the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. Having limited the study to the "goodness-experience-in-nature", I looked for subjects who could be articulate about such an embodied, pre-discursive experience. I found more than I had aimed for in the cutting-edge work of American Philosopher Eugene Gendlin, founder of the somatic techniques of focusing and Thinking-At-the-Edge (TAE), which I adopted for developing a first-person and second-person methodology for my research. Moreover, his seminal philosophical work *A Process Model* (1997), became the conceptual foundation which enabled me to make some sense of my findings.

The experience of the-goodness-feeling-in-nature was explored with a group of 15 advanced focusing students on a beautiful spring day, in the wild oak forest of Alonei Yitzhak in central Israel. The focusers met on the edge of the forest and open wheat fields, and paired up (in focusing one is the focuser and the other the listener). They were then instructed to look for a "good-feeling-place" (a place that makes them feel good). Once found, they were asked to remain there for about 20 minutes and describe their experience to their listener, then switch roles. The listeners took full, word-for-word transcripts of the session, which became my raw material for a hermeneutic analysis, looking at the evolution of the experiencing of goodness in the place.

The reading was done within the premises of discourse analysis. Each text was read and coded repetitiously, according to principles that evolved with the reading.

A content analysis of the texts yielded descriptions of a sense of an inner knowing resonating with a knowing or meaning embodied in nature; a heightened sense of ability; a concern with moving and stopping; a noticing of "an immensity"; an experiencing of inner landscapes; a feeling of communion, care and generosity; and an occupation with universal themes such as dying, living, and the meaning of

human and non-human presence. Most striking, a significant majority of the documented experiences contained descriptions of feelings of a "boundlessness" between inner and outer realities (referred to in some cases, perhaps in allusion to Kabbalistic language, as a "dropping-of-partitions"), which came coupled with expressions of wonder at the coexisting feeling of a solid sense of self.

Another, structural reading, traced the "flow of attention" in the focusing transcripts, as moving between two axes: a sensorial differentiation between "in" and "out", and a transition of expression between "conceptualized" and "non-conceptualized" meanings. A crossing of these two axes produced a four cornered matrix I call the "Field of Meaning". The verbal description of the experience comprises three general steps: 1-"before-it" (pre-conceptualized), 2-"within-it" (non-conceptualized threshold), and 3-"after-it" (newly-conceptualized).

The process of transitioning from the pre-conceptualized (old knowledge) to the newly-conceptualized (insights about self and world), was perceived as a synthesizing of meaning emerging out of the experiencing of the goodness in nature, which I named the "Formation of Acquaintance Process": an iterative unfolding of attention which begins with "An Appearing": a sensory awareness of something "calling" for attention, which then follows three grand inductive steps: 1. A pre-conceptualized experiencing of "it", over varying depths of "within" such as "Tasting", "Dipping", and "Diving". 2. Contexting: relating the particular experience to one's private-world-of-meaning. 3. Universalizing: making grander and grander generalizations of meaning so as to befit more and more situations. As this process accumulates reference to one's self recedes from expression. At the "Moment of Acquaintance", the "Something that Appeared" was sometimes pleasant, but often disturbing. The very movement of attention towards "it" put into motion a process of becoming familiar with the "it" which produced a change, accumulating in fresh conceptualizing, which was experienced in itself, as the very experience of goodness.

The "Formation of Acquaintance Process", as described in this study, was congruous with other scales of experience such as Gendlin's "Experiencing Scale" (1969), and Seamon's "Modes of Encounter scale" (1979), on which it adds and articulates the contextualizing and conceptualizing tiers as integrative to the goodness experience of being in nature. The affinity between experiencing-in-interaction and the making-of-meaning, echoes the thinking of many other phenomenologists (Schroeder, Harris, Lasri, Abram, Fisher) as an expression of the formation of an embodied meaning.

The main insight arising from this study, is that the goodness-feeling-in-nature is closely related to the formation of meaning: at first in an unconceptualized, preverbal form; and then slowly, given time and attention, the meaning emerges as a freshly conceptualized insight.

In the discussion, I illustrate how important insights of post-humanist thinking, and in particular Gendlin's *Process model* theory, may be used to explain this phenomena. In conclusion I relate to, and elaborate on, an emergent theory of discursive / non-discursive place, as an hypothesis about possible environmental features and processes which may obstruct or be conducive to the genesis of such a goodness-experience.

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