

NATURAL:MIND

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THE MOON

Until recently, the Moon belonged to the class of things that are visible, but inaccessible to our hearing, smell, touch or taste. Now, some men have touched it. Has this made the Moon less dubious? Descartes states that we must doubt our senses because, among other reasons, they are mutually contradictory. Until now, the Moon had been perceived by only one of our senses. Therefore, there was no contradiction between the senses. Now, such a contradiction has become possible. Thus we may doubt the Moon, but in a different way. For example: how do we know that someone has touched it? By having seen the event on TV and reading about it in newspapers. Images on TV are dubious, they could be tricks. If they also have a subtitle "live from the Moon," they become not only dubious, but also suspect. Whoever says, "it is raining, and that is the truth," says less than one who simply says, "it is raining." As for the newspapers, their credibility is not absolute. Hence we may doubt that the Moon has been touched. But this doubt would be even less reasonable than the following: is the Moon fiction or reality? It is less reasonable, because it is less reasonable to doubt culture than to doubt nature.

If done methodically, to doubt nature is reasonable, because it results in the natural sciences. But apparently, to doubt culture (TV and newspapers) results in nothing. Since the Moon (according to TV and newspapers) has left the field of nature and entered into that of culture, it is better to no longer doubt it. It no longer remains within the competence of astronomers, poets, and magicians, and is now handed over to the competence of politicians, lawyers, and technocrats. And who could doubt them? The Moon is therefore the immovable (although mobile) property of NASA. The Moon is “real estate” = in a state of reality, and any doubts about it have ceased. However, there are still some problems that are relative, not so much to the Moon itself, but rather to our own being-in-the-world. These are confusing problems. I shall speak about some of them.

On a clear night, when I look at the Moon, I do not see NASA’s satellite. I see a C or a D, or a luminous circle. I see “the phases of the Moon.” The Moon changes shape. But I have learned that these changes are only apparent, and that the Moon itself does not change shape. Why are they “apparent?” Is the Earth’s shadow not as real as the Moon? Common sense tells me to see change, not of “the Moon itself,” but of “my perception of the Moon.” The same common sense does not apply to primitive people. They see the Moon rising, setting and rising again. Not only do I see the Moon with my eyes, but also through my culture’s common sense, which tells me to see “the phases of the Moon” and not (as yet), “NASA’s property.”

Would vision be the most common of all senses, more common than common sense? That is: common to all who have eyes? Can all those who have eyes see the Moon?

Photographic cameras and ants? Is it not anthropomorphic to say that the Moon is seen by ants? If I were to build a lens that is structurally identical to an ant's eye, would I see the Moon? Or is there a common sense that relates only to human eyes, which tells humans to see the Moon? Could there be an eye disease in the West that tells me to see "the phases of the Moon," and another more general human disease that tells me to see the Moon?

On a clear night, when I look at the Moon, I do not see NASA's satellite, although I know that what I see is NASA's satellite. I still see the Earth's natural satellite; my vision does not integrate my knowledge. Such a lack of knowledge integration by the sense of vision characterizes particular situations, the so-called "crises." It is probable the Hellenic Greeks knew that the Moon is a sphere, however, they continued to see it as a Goddess. It is probable that the Melanesians know that the Moon is NASA's satellite, however, they continue to see it as a symbol of fertility. In a situation of crisis, our worldview cannot integrate our knowledge.

In order to see the Moon it is necessary to look at it. I do not need to listen to the wind in order to hear it. I may, but I do not need to. In order to see, I need to gesticulate with my eyes and my head, "to lift my eyes to the sky." I need to do what dogs do in order to listen and smell: they gesticulate with their nose and ears. Their world must be different from ours. For us, odors and sounds are *given*, but lights are provoked by the attention (gesticulation) we pay to it. For dogs, odors and sounds are equally provoked. We live in two worlds: one that is given and the other that is provoked by the attention

we pay to it. In this sense, sight is similar to touch: it is drawn toward the phenomenon that is to be provoked. The “objective” explanation that eyesight is the reception of electromagnetic wave emissions (just as hearing is the reception of sound waves) conceals the fact that eyes are closer in similarity to arms than to ears. They seek, they do not stand still. This is important with cases such as the Moon, which is visible but not audible. It has been sought, and not passively perceived.

Cultures that do not lift their eyes to the sky, and instead concentrate their attention on the ground (the so called “telluric” ones) do not seek, do not “produce” the Moon. Cultures that spend their time looking at the sky (the so called “uranic” ones) “pro-duce” the Moon, which then occupies an important role in such cultures. The Moon is, in this sense, a “product” of such cultures. How then may I affirm that NASA has transformed the Moon from a natural phenomenon into a cultural one (into an instrument of astronautics) by having touched it, if the Moon has always been a product of our “uranic” culture? In order to answer this question, I must look closer at the Moon.

What does it mean, “to look closer?” It could mean to get closer to the Moon by climbing a mountain or by rocket. It could mean to get closer with a telescope or similar tricks. But this is not what I am trying to get at. Since the Moon is not a given fact, but one that is sought by the attention given to it, “to look closer” could mean to look at it with greater attention in order to see it more clearly. So, if on clear nights I should look at it with more attention, I will understand why I see it as a natural phenomenon. I cannot see it whenever or wherever I want.

Even though in order to see it, I must want to see it, the Moon itself conditions my will. The Moon is provoked by my will to see it; this, however, becomes actualized within the rules of the Moon's game. The Moon imposes the rules of its game onto me. That is why it is difficult to doubt or manipulate it. The Moon is not of my imagination; it is a thing of nature.

My gaze has proven that the Moon is not of my imagination, but it has not yet proven anything in relation to it belonging to nature or culture. Or in fact it has. The Moon is stubborn. It imposes the rules of its own game. I only see where it is because of its own need, a need called "the laws of nature." Cultural things are not as stubborn. They are where they ought to be in order to serve me. If I want to see my shoes, I look in the direction where they ought to be, I see them, and I make use of them. This is the essence of culture. If I want to see the Moon, I am necessarily obliged to look in its direction. This is the essence of nature. That is why I see the Moon as a natural phenomenon, although I know that currently the Moon is no longer where it is by necessity, but is where it ought to be in order to serve as a platform for trips to Venus. I am still unable to see the Moon's utility. I see it as stubbornly useless. I still see it as if it were the Earth's natural satellite.

But my gaze does not give a satisfactory answer to my question. I do not ask why I see the Moon as a natural thing despite NASA, but rather, why do I see it this way despite the fact that it has always been a product of the "uranic" aspect of my culture. Therefore, I do not ask because of my inability to integrate new knowledge, but because of my inability to remember origins. I must help my gaze

in order to provoke it to answer such a difficult question. Why do I see the Moon as a given, and not as something originally provoked by my culture? The answer starts to articulate itself: it is because I am ambivalent in relation to my culture. On one hand, I admit that my culture is composed of things faithfully waiting to be used by me. On the other hand, I must admit that I cannot be without these things. This is why the Moon is the exact opposite of my shoes. The Moon is necessary, but dispensable. The shoes are deliberate (unnecessary) but indispensable. The Moon imposes its rules over me with its stubborn necessity. The shoes oppress me with their unnecessary indispensability. This is why I cannot see that the Moon was originally provoked by my culture: why would my culture have provoked something that is necessary but dispensable?

My view is deformed by a prejudice which is part of my culture's common sense: all that is necessary and dispensable I call "nature," all that is unnecessary and indispensable I call "culture." Progress is about transforming necessary and dispensable things into unnecessary and indispensable ones. Nature is anterior to culture, and progress is the transformation of nature into culture. When NASA touched the Moon and transformed it into a platform, another step toward progress was taken.

Such a prejudice, which stems from our common sense, is logically contradictory, ontologically false, existentially unbearable, and must be abandoned. And if I manage to push it away, I shall see the Moon more clearly. I see now, surprisingly, that the Moon, far from being a natural phenomenon on its way to becoming culture,

is, and always has been, a cultural phenomenon that is starting to become nature. Here is what culture really is: a set of necessary things that become progressively more indispensable. And here is what nature is: a set of unnecessary and dispensable things. Nature is a late and luxurious product of culture. My gaze toward the Moon proves this in the following manner:

For one moment, let us imagine that NASA had really transformed the Moon from nature into culture. This would have been an exceptionally happy case of a “return to nature.” We would only need to cut NASA’s budget and the Moon would return to being a subject for poets and escape the technocrats’ competence. This is Romanticism (from Rousseau all the way to the hippies): to cut NASA’s budget. But would this be a “return?” No, it would be an advance. Before NASA, the Moon was a product of Western, “uranic” culture, which had as a projected aim the ultimate manipulation of the Moon by NASA. Our Neolithic ancestors looked at the Moon (and thus “pro-duced” it) with the aim of eventually transforming it into a platform to Venus. And that is what we, their descendants, see when we look at it: a fertility symbol, goddess, and natural satellite. These are several phases on the path toward becoming a platform. We always see the moon as a potential platform, although we do not know it consciously. NASA already existed in germinal form within the first gaze directed at the Moon.

Therefore, to cut NASA’s budget would be a step beyond NASA. It would transform the Moon into an object of “art for art’s sake,” unnecessary, dispensable, to be sung by poets. Such an object we could call a “natural object”

in an existentially bearable sense. This transformation of culture into nature happens everywhere: in the Alps, beaches, and in the suburbs of big cities. The 18th century Romantics “discovered” nature (that is, they invented it), and the Romantics of our “*fin de siècle*” are realizing nature. One of the methods of this transformation is called “applied ecology.” If this method were applied to the Moon it would become nature. If we were to look at the Moon during clear nights and see it as a natural phenomenon, we would not be seeing the Moon’s pre-NASA past, but its post-NASA state. Our vision would be prophetic, that is, inspired by Romanticism. And in effect, this is what we always do: we look at the Moon romantically. This is why we see it as if it were already a natural object, and not what we know it is: the object of a culture that aims to transform it into a platform.

This is a disturbing answer. The Moon is seen as a natural object, that is, as our culture’s ultimate product. How then, in such a situation can I engage myself in culture, if it tends to transform itself into its own betrayal, into Romantic nature? This question, however, does not touch the Moon. It continues unperturbed in its necessary and, for the moment, dispensable way. To inquire in this way is of little use. It is useless to lift our eyes toward it. “Lift not your eyes to it, for it moves impotently, just as you and I.”²

2. This last sentence, which is rendered in English in the original text, is a reference to the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam (1048-1123). There is one specific quatrain from the fifth edition of Edward Fitzgerald’s translation of 1889 that has the same essence of this sentence, however, Flusser summarizes the quatrain but gives no reference. This reoccurs in some of the following essays. [TN]

MOUNTAINS

Whoever approaches a mountain range coming from the plains, suddenly suspecting that those nebulous blue forms that popped up on the horizon could be mountains, may nurture the following thoughts: I suspect that these forms on the horizon are mountains, and not clouds, although they seem like clouds, because I know that mountains, if seen from afar, seem like clouds. If I did not know this, the suspicion of seeing mountains would not have occurred to me. Within a few minutes I shall verify my suspicion: I shall see if such forms are mountains or clouds. But let us suppose that I had never seen or heard of mountains: I would obviously have no doubt that the shapes on the horizons are clouds. And in a few minutes, once such forms had revealed themselves as non-clouds, what would I be seeing? Would I not have such an extraordinary and violent experience that it would shock me? A shock that could kill me? He who only knows the plains, where the landscape is always flat, will hardly survive when confronted with something so immensely extraordinary, so gigantically absurd as mountains. The emotions we feel as we approach a mountain range are a pale and late shadow of the sacred terror that our

Siberian ancestors must have experienced as they saw the Pamir mountain range for the first time. (That is, if the hypothesis that we are descendants of the people from the steppe is correct.) This primordial terror must be buried deeply within our collective subconscious.

To look at mountains through eyes borrowed from the nomads of the steppe, is not however, the only way to look at them “without prejudice.” The other way is to look at them through the eyes of a mountain dweller that has never left his land. How does someone who knows all the tracks that climb the mountainside and all its fauna and flora see the mountain? Does he see the mountain with the tracks, the animals, and the plants in the same way that we see it? Or does he see tracks, animals, and plants inserted within a general structure called “mountain?” To the extent that what we see is a mountain covered by particular accidents, and what he sees is particular things that relate to each other in the form of a mountain? This is an unanswerable question because we cannot borrow the eyes of the mountain dweller or of the nomad from the steppe. We are condemned to look at the mountains through the lens of our culture’s prejudices. We live, as a consequence of this, in a world in which mountains, if seen from afar, seem like clouds.

By admitting that we see mountains through cultural prejudices (as Westerners, Bourgeois, and through the lens of the 20th century), could the mountain dweller and the nomad see without prejudice (naively)? Certainly not. The mountain dweller is conditioned to see them (that is if he does see them, in a rigorous sense) by his culture. And the nomad was conditioned by his culture not to expect

mountains, hence their shock. A “naive view, without prejudices” is not a view that is primitive, original, or anterior to culture. It is the view sought by a Western cultural elite, a late product of its millennial development. Naivety is an ideal of a disillusioned culture, an ideal reached by deliberate methods. Non-deliberate naivety is unimaginable; it does not exist (even in children).

But it is still a fact: whoever wants to see mountains as they are, and not as some prejudices make us believe they are, must seek them naively. They must seek to do it deliberately, that is, to look at them not through the eyes of supposed “primitives,” but through eyes built especially for naive vision, in the laboratories of specialists in phenomenology. In other terms, if I seek “to allow the mountains to speak, so that they may reveal to me what they are,” I am assuming an attitude that was conditioned by a specific and highly sophisticated stage of my culture. This apparent contradiction seems to be inevitable, and does not necessarily invalidate the results that may be reached by a deliberately naive view.

Let us suppose, therefore, that I am a 20th century bourgeois man who approaches the Jura Mountains via the Bourg-en-Bresse road, in order to see them as they are, and not as the tourists see them (tourists being 20th century bourgeois people who approach the Jura Mountains via the Bourg-en-Bresse road in order to see them as they ought to be, according to particular models). My task shall be to attain a deliberately naive view of the Jura Mountains, and this implies the suspension of the prejudices that I nurture in relation to them. However, I may then observe that such prejudices are not necessarily

a hindrance in order to see the mountains. They may, on the contrary, become powerful mediations for my view of “mountain-ness.” Even more so because they are superficial prejudices that do not seem to touch the phenomenon proper that is the mountain. Effectively, I am verifying this very thing as I approach the Jura Mountains via the road. I nurture several prejudices in relation to the Jura, and some of these prejudices relate to the name (the mere name) of the mountains. As I try to put one of these prejudices into parentheses (a modest task, apparently easy), the following happens:

I remember from secondary school that there is a period in Earth’s history called “Jurassic,” and that it occupies the central period of the Earth’s Middle Ages. I suppose that this name is due to the fact that the rocks of the Jura served for the first excavations of this period (which, if I am not mistaken, is linked to the giant reptiles). This means, therefore, that the mountain range I am beginning to climb was formed during that period, and that the white rocks starting to shine through the trees of the multicolored forest were used in other times by brontosauri to lay their eggs, and by pterodactyls to take off, as today’s airplanes do in search of Geneva’s airport. (This is only a supposition, as during that time neither lake Lemman, nor the Alps, nor even Europe existed in order to be flown over.) This is not a display of knowledge; it is merely a poorly digested information salad from school, superficially assimilated. It is prejudice. And, still, as if by magic, this prejudice has been lifted from the books in order to penetrate the concrete world. I cannot pretend, suddenly, that this prejudice may be diminished when I

look at the mountains. And for having remembered it, the pterodactyl is just as present in the mountains as are the leaves of autumn (although they occupy a different level of reality). I could do two things: control my prejudice in relation to the Jurassic Period at the next bookshop in St. Claude, and afterward look at the mountains with a more correct knowledge (although necessarily superficial and scientifically disinterested). Hence, I shall not reach a naive view of the mountains. Or I may attempt to reduce my prejudice, not completely, but in order to reach its essence, which is this: mountains are things that have a history, or, more precisely, a biography. What will happen if I were to look at the mountains through prejudices thus reduced?

This: When I say that these mountains have a biography, I mean to say that they are processes that start with their formation (“birth”), end with their leveling-out (“death”), and that go through stages in which accidents may modify them. They emerge as something new (like newborn kittens or a brand new car), they age, they are used and abused (like a cat that has lost an eye or a second hand car that had an accident), and they disappear from the surface of the Earth (like a dead cat or a recycled car). When I look at these mountains now, I see only one moment of their biography. And now that I assume such a prejudice in relation to them, I see it clearly. The Jura Mountains are in their prime, the Massif Central, which I passed yesterday, are ancient and decrepit, and the Alps on the other side of the lake (whose violent contours I can see) are in full puberty. This is no longer a prejudice: I can now clearly see the phenomenon proper. But this is

important: I would not have seen it had I not nurtured those prejudices.

I also see that although the mountain is a process of diachronic structure, similar to that of my car and my hand, there is a difference: my own biography encompasses that of my car's, and it is encompassed by that of the mountain's. My car is an accident in my life, and my life is an accident in the mountain's history. This is therefore not a prejudice: I can see it if I look at my car, my hand and the mountain. I can concretely see that the car is more ephemeral than my hand, and the hand more than the mountain. And I see that this fact has nothing to do with the size and the material of the thing. The car is bigger than my body, but I see that I can outlive it. The car is made of steel, which is more durable than the material of the mountain (not to speak of my body's material), but I see that the mountain will outlive the car. The difference is in the rhythm of the three things (car, hand, and mountain), and I see such difference, as incredible as it may seem. That which we call "life" is a process with a specific rhythm, and that is why I see that the mountain is not a living thing: not because it is not made of amino acids or because it is large, but because it obeys a different rhythm. If I could penetrate this rhythm, I would have access to the mountain's essence. But I cannot.

To penetrate a rhythm means to co-vibrate, to be in "sympathy." This sympathy is considered "knowledge" to the Pythagoreans. They conceived the world as a context of things that vibrate in several rhythms, and knowledge as sympathy with all the rhythms. This knowledge was possible thanks to mathematics and music, because those

are the structures of all possible rhythms. If I look at the mountain as I am doing now, I am seeing it Pythagorically: I am trying to discover its essence; that is, its rhythm. But with a difference: I no longer believe that I could reach it mathematically. I know that the mathematization of the mountain will consequently have several strands of the natural sciences, but not the discovery of its essence. That is because mathematics is not the structure of all possible rhythms, but only that of the human intellect. And as for music, I know next to nothing of its efficiency as a method to discover the essence of mountains. Music has never been used for such a purpose along the course of my culture. But I suspect that it has a human rhythm just like mathematics, since it is a close relative. I look at the mountain more or less as Pythagoras did; I feel, just like he did, the mountain's rhythm. But I have lost his conviction that this rhythm is articulated mathematically, and that numbers are the mountain's essence. If to lose convictions is to become naive, then I am more naive than he was. We find ourselves, both he and I, at the two extremes of the process known as the "history of the natural sciences." He ignored everything in relation to pterodactyls, and I ignore everything in relation to the essence of mountains. The history of science is a process along the course of which "essential" knowledge has diminished, and "naivety" increased.

I cannot be sympathetic with the mountain. Hence, this inability of mine is a way through which the mountain reveals itself. It reveals itself as a thing whose rhythm can be felt, measured, even manipulated, but never existentially absorbed. Here is one aspect of the mountain's essence: to

be a thing that obeys an ungraspable existential rhythm. Faith may move mountains, and bulldozers may do the same. But nothing is able to grasp its rhythm. There it is, still and silent, passive in its majestic beauty, and now that I have climbed it, I see that its rocks synchronize its diachronicity into parallel layers, transforming “anterior” into “below.” I see how it reveals itself under the October sun, through the colorful flames of its forests. I know and feel the pulsation by which it is possessed, but I cannot pulsate with it. It is too different from my own rhythm. This is what I have in mind when I say “mountain”: an ungraspable rhythm despite all knowledge. However, if knowledge did not exist, such an essence would not have revealed itself. Had I suspended knowledge, the mountain would have silenced itself in relation to its ungraspable rhythm.

I did not manage to suspend my prejudice in relation to a specific connotation of the name “Jura.” Perhaps I did not want to suspend it? Was I right in not wanting to do it? Whoever manages to penetrate deeper into the mountain’s essence may answer it: a perfectly viable task through a variety of different methods (all deliberate). As for myself, I shall seek to spend some time in the mountain’s bosom. Not as a nomad, or mountain dweller, or child, or tourist, but as someone who cannot and does not want to suspend particular prejudices in relation to the Jura Mountains. As someone who is condemned to live with such prejudices, and sometimes even likes them: another type of naivety?