

Fall Equinox Abbot Talks: "Nature's Conscience"

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Part 1. Sea Eagle Nestlings

Sydney Olympic Park, Sydney, Australia. In a Sea Eagle's nest sixty feet high up a eucalyptus tree I watched as a live Internet web camera showed two eagle nestlings hatching from their eggs. The firstborn was a day older than the second born which apparently gave it the instinctive right to attack its smaller, younger sibling whenever the impulse arose. The impulse arose frequently, and the attacks began when the firstborn was two days old and the second born had only been alive for a day.

In the beginning I saw number 1, the firstborn, clumsily peck #2 on the head at meal time. Every time the mother tried to feed the younger eaglet the older eaglet would peck it on the head. Hard. The younger eaglet would fall flat on its face and stay there even after the older eaglet stopped bashing it. Eventually it would carefully and wobbly lift its head and try to get a mouthful of food, but as soon as the mother tried to feed it the baby would be beaten down again. The parent did nothing.

It was sickening to watch, and after a couple of days of checking in to see how they were doing, I stopped. I did a little research and found that this was common practice among Sea Eagle nestlings and sometimes it resulted in the death of the second born. According to my source the *Golden Eagle* first born *always* kills its younger sibling. But with Sea Eagles, death doesn't always come to the smaller one, and I stopped watching for a week or so to see if matters had changed. Well, yes they had; and, no they hadn't.

The smaller chick was much smaller than it should have been and it appeared to mostly lie face down in the nest. Now, the larger chick didn't wait for feeding time to attack the smaller sibling; it just seemed to attack randomly, even while it was already face down in submission. I had enough and deleted the Sea Eagle webcam from my favorite places. But at the same time I had to ask myself why I didn't have the stomach to watch the ways of God as Nature.

Part 2. Why?

*Naturam venerare, naturam venerans,
Naturam venerari, naturam venerans,
Naturi venarator, naturam venerans.*

This is a chant I do as part of my morning meditations. Basically it's four Latin phrases that say I revere nature. But how can I revere nature when along with its beauty and awe-inspiring cosmology it is the living embodiment of physical and psychological suffering? Thousands or millions of kinds of pain are constantly being expressed all over the world every night and day. I don't know about eagle psychology, but a human being child that is frequently and viciously beaten into submission can become a sociopath that grows up, if it survives, to a life of treachery and cunning and twisted meanness. (Can an eagle become a sociopath?)

How can I celebrate my reverence for Nature when I know pain and humiliation are so much a part of it? Yes, I agree with Heraclitus who said, "Men would not have known the name of justice if these unjust things were not (frag. 59, Burnet)," but how can I become indifferent to the depths of suffering we see and know every day, every where?

Yes, I understand that God is Nature, a living being, and it cannot consider the happiness of everything and everyone whenever it follows its laws and makes some natural movement—such as thunder and lightening, volcanoes and flowing lava, earthquakes, tsunamis, blizzards, hurricanes, wildfires, tornadoes, cancer, lunacy, and species extinction. It is confined to its own laws. Heraclitus again:

The sun will not overstep his measures; if he does, the Erinyes, the handmaids of justice, will find him out (frag. 29, Burnet).

But why am I chanting reverence for this awesome god of pain and misery? Where is the caring? Where is the providence we associate with its consciousness?

Part 3. The Stoic God

"God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, excess and hunger; but he takes various shapes . . ."

Heraclitus (fragment 36, Burnet)

This is what we Stoics know. Our god is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, et cetera, and all the polarities that exist, because it is Nature. God and Nature are one and the same. God is the cosmos, the realm of the corporeal, and it is all alive. God is a living corporeal being. One, whole, living being.

And for more than 2000 years we have been saying that this Living Being is also conscious and providential. Nature our god created consciousness. Yes, I believe that. I didn't create consciousness; you didn't create consciousness. Nature's god did it. Some Stoics even say that God IS consciousness, but not all Stoics would go that far.

And this conscious and providential living being is everything, and it created everything, including beauty, truth, and love. And the Stoic god sees its creation and sees that it is good: "To God all things are fair and good and right, but men hold some things wrong and some right (Heraclitus fragment #60, Burnet)."

Part 4. We are It!

In the biblical mythology of genesis, in the beginning of our existence, it is said that we lived in a kind of paradise, a Garden of Eden. But this garden had a very strange tree named the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. At that time, human beings were just one of many animals that inhabited the garden, but only humans were created in God's image. And that made us special. In the Garden, we could do just about anything and everything we wanted to do except one thing. One rule. God told us we were not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And so, of course, we did.

And that's when we discovered the polarity of good and evil and became the living conscience of God. That's when we became a species that held some things wrong and some right. We became God's conscience in the world. We had his eyes and ears and rational mind, and now we had his heart. In the mythology of the Garden of Eden we are told eating from that tree was a great misfortune, but those storytellers were wrong. In fact, this stage in our evolution as a species was not a curse but a godlike responsibility and gift. Knowledge of good and evil gave us the need and ability to be the healers of our planet. It gave us a conscience.

God created beauty, truth, and love—among other wonderful gifts of the corporeal world, and that's how I know God is providential. God, aka Nature, also created what we call the conscience. Conscience is an inner sense or moral guide that helps a person tell right from wrong and pushes them to do what is right. When we see pain, for example, most of us are inspired to lessen that pain however we can. Healers come in many forms in the professions of medicine and justice; and, in all the arts and sciences many have dedicated their lives to God's care of the world. They *are* God's care for the world.

But being God's conscience is not an absolute command for all human beings. With freedom of choice we are not slaves to divine command. God may have to follow its cosmic rules and regulations, but we don't. We of all the animals can override our instincts. And, we are not all born one way. Just as one child may be a musical prodigy and another tone deaf, so to do we differ in our individual capacities for feeling and acting upon the well-being of all forms of corporeal existence. Our ability as healers of mind, body, and soul is an awesome gift and responsibility. In the Ethics of Stoic philosophy we begin with self love, *oikeiosis*, then with study and practice we can evolve to a higher form of love, ultimately a love for the soul of the world. The Conscience of World Soul.

Nestling Update

It's been about seven weeks since the nestlings were born. They are both still alive. The younger sibling is about half the size of the older one, but both eaglets have their dark gray pin-feathers coming out. I watched them while they were being fed.

As soon as the adult eagle arrived with any food the little one immediately prostrated itself with its face flat into the nest. It stayed that way the entire time until the older sibling had finished eating. If there was any food left over the younger would carefully sidle up to the adult and almost violently grab each morsel the parent offered in its beak.

After feeding, the day-old older sibling often went into what appeared to be a food coma. That's the only time the little one would lift its head up to be fed. I don't know if the older one pecks the younger one any more. I didn't see it happen. Apparently it doesn't have to because the lesson of remaining face down and prostrate is acted out at every feeding that I saw. Complete submission.

But I did observe one incident I found rather remarkable. In these food comas it appears the big fat eaglet is unable to awaken for long, and I saw the little one yank at the feathers on top of the bigger sibling's head. It happened several times. After this yanking the big one would lift its head, open its eyes briefly, then close them and go back down to sleep. One time the little one beaked the big one in the head, and this time when the it lifted its head the little one pecked at its *face* hard, really hard. The big one just went back to sleep.

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