

12. Company

Georg Maier

Searching Inside and Outside

In the last chapter we asked, “How do appearances become meaningful and consequential to the individual?” And there we drew upon the distinction between *knowing that* and *being here*. Since “being here” leads us to take steps in life, it became apparent that our relation to the world was turning *inside-out*: what had been outside us now showed up as the source of individual counsel—occurring in the guise of accidental events. Here we are no longer talking about an outside world of objects. Rather, we are speaking of appearances we experience as involving ourselves personally. We participate in what appears to be outside us. Insofar as we follow our understanding of the indications we receive, we can truly find ourselves *being here*.

Being here is what happens when the present situation is attended to, intentionally organized, and discovered to be our own business. Being here is just applying the aesthetic approach to real life!

Furthermore, we can remind ourselves of the alternative, anaesthetic, “logical” approach where the individual still remains unaffected by the knowledge he or she gains. As the attitude appropriate for scientific cognition, it is expected to be “intersubjective”—that is, of equal meaning to all who take interest. The individual is supposed to be detached from knowledge, just as the subject is supposed to be detached from the object. This realm is where we search for a general understanding in terms that we can reciprocally communicate with others. The realm of “What” contains contents in a form that does not require, that may even rule out, individual involvement.

Search inside yourself
And you will find the world.

While sense perception offers us particular appearances, our mind associates these with general concepts. So it is *inside* ourselves that we find the tools necessary to comprehend the world in universal terms, to grasp it “scientifically”. In the process of writing this book its

authors had to search diligently *inside*, looking for conveyable general concepts suitable for that other realm:

Search in the world outside
And you will find yourself.

Most likely, not all we have produced has turned out to be as “intersubjective” as we hoped and strived to achieve.

Can Habitats Be Recognized as a Reality?

In seeking appropriate, general concepts for the outside world in its specific association with an individual person, we coined the term “biographic habitat.” It is a novel concept, and keeping in mind that it has been borrowed from ecology, we may remind ourselves of the relation between surroundings, environment, and habitat as they are understood in natural science.

The *surroundings* of an object may be thought of in a merely spatial sense, but also include the ever-changing conditions given, for example, by weather and illumination. We call these surroundings an *environment* when we consider how all the conditions of a place support and sustain the various organisms living there. And the aspects of such an environment, in their relevance to a specific organism, constitute that organism’s *habitat*. That is, a habitat is an environment as experienced by a particular species.

Very different habitats permeate each other within a specific, local environment. Furthermore, each of the naturally coexisting plants and animals participates one way or another in forming conditions the others depend upon. You could say that members of a mutual environment contribute reciprocally to each other’s habitat.

While individual plants typically remain rooted in place, they can emigrate in seed form to areas where a fitting habitat-organism relation may develop. Animals that move in space participate in the conditions of one area after another. Migrating birds offer a striking example of this.

It has already been pointed out that in nature organisms will in many cases be apt to appear spontaneously if offered suitable environments. Before humankind became knowledgeable in the field of zoology, it was thought that rats were bred by heaps of garbage, because experience showed that if you have such a heap of garbage, soon enough rats will inhabit it. Microorganisms especially will tend to appear as conditions hold sway that promote their presence. If left open to

the atmosphere, moist foodstuffs will tend to become moldy. Forms of life not needing to be specially introduced are “cosmopolitan,” potentially living everywhere. Moreover, organisms show an astonishing ability to modify their demands on a habitat; microbes can become insensitive to drugs that once excluded their presence. On a larger time scale, evolution is taken to be effected by modifications in the environment. In general, habitats are structured in time: for example, much of the plant world undergoes phases of development that follow the course of the year, sprouting, blossoming, bearing fruit, and declining.

Here, in summary, are some aspects of the relation between species and habitat:

- The habitat fitting a species is the necessary condition for that species’ physical existence.
- Habitats of different species interpenetrate.
- Species within a shared environment may contribute essentially to the habitats of others.
- Some species move between different spaces, according to the changing needs of their life cycles. Therefore, a habitat may comprise dissimilar geographical areas.
- An environment can work as developing agent for some of its envired species.

So its habitat emerges as an indispensable constituent of a species. That is, a habitat is the essential complement to the physical body. Such deliberations can form a starting point in assessing the *human* biographic habitat. In applying the above list of aspects to human beings, I would tentatively replace “species” with “individual.” In this light we see human individuals as part and parcel of each other’s biographic habitat. They form each other’s *Company*. Furthermore, the Company will effect developments in an individual’s understanding, and individuals living on other continents may well participate in each other’s respective Companies.

Appreciation: Recognition and Integration

Human *existence*, in the sense of the last chapter, is not something given to us regardless of whether we are asleep, dreaming, preoccupied, or otherwise *not being here*. We exist by

engaging appearances, intentionally organizing them and becoming aware of them as our own business. As we saw in the first chapter of this book, the wrong-minded student was searching for meaningful experience. He was endeavoring to *appreciate* the appearances he encountered.

In extending the concept of habitat to embrace the whole of experience met with in the individual's biography, we are linking events normally taken to be independent. And it is true that they are contingent—they are not part of a foreseeable plan. But this need not mean they happen by chance, at random or haphazardly! It only means that the sense of an event cannot be predicted.

Looking back, we may recognize how certain of our past deeds were stimulated by key appearances. At first, however, it is as if our recollections were made up of unconnected events; we are, as it were, on the first level of appreciation (see chapter six). Nevertheless, at a second level of appreciation we may integrate some events to form *expressive* images. We saw examples in chapter eight: disconnected ink blotches became the image of a cow, and an initially unrecognized metallic configuration became the Newborn. In our present context this discovery of images means recognizing how some events were prerequisite to following ones, which is the contextual aspect of biography. Such special connections within the sequence of events cannot just be asserted; they need to be empirically discovered. Insofar as such relations show up, our world becomes a habitat-world.

Accompanying and Being Accompanied

In the third level of appreciation, *accompanying*, the crucial relation between events is not causal. As we said earlier, "In accompanying a subject, we continue to learn and our judgments develop. As we move from one judgment to a later one, we confront the individual essence of what we are accompanying. On this third level we are furthest away both from preconception and from the logical mode of cognition. We must accept the development that occurs while at the same time participating in and accepting our share of responsibility for it. The being we accompany has become part of our lives."

As in ecology, we will be led to complement our understanding of ourselves as individuals with an understanding of a specific habitat that belongs to us. And what is more, we will come to recognize our fellow human beings—who participate in our lives, and in whose lives we participate reciprocally—as the *paradigm* of biographic habitat.

If we take the workings of a biographic habitat of our own seriously, then at some point we will get the surprising feeling that what had been the “outside world” is positively engaged in relating to us. In the following remarkable passage Hans Rudolf Schweizer recounts how such an intensive mutual relationship to the mountains developed over the course of a lifetime:

To see is to exchange (seeing is exchanging); we choose and create the images, but even before that they choose us. In this way I have remained spellbound by the mountains since my childhood. They offered me images of never dwindling vigor in rock and ice, in the mountain forest with its hidden sources. They demanded the utmost exertion of body and soul, but they always remained close and familiar to me with their breath and the smell of the Earth, with the clarity and hardness of their forms, in the midst of storm and in face of their ferocity, when we had to find a reliable climbing route for a whole group of people even in a blinding flurry of snowfall, to endure the cold breath of a night spent in high altitude. These days their imaging power concentrates itself more and more inside a limited region, in a particular valley with which my most treasured memories connect. In my early childhood the image of the mountains was above all a high, completely white peak that impressed itself on me, the Weisshorn in the Valais, as seen from its bright eastward side; this still has the same attraction which is beyond words; it is not lessened to a mere symbol for a pure, high goal. When on one of those clear days in October the mountains are freshly and deeply covered with snow, the hours again fill themselves in gazing upon this purest, most shining white of the glacier slopes and I stay rapt as if it were by the most wonderful music.

Certainly everyone would agree that we attend to images, and that we even give rise to them. But Schweizer surprises us by saying that *images first choose us* as those for whom they will be relevant. One phase of this choosing is described when he says, “In my early childhood the image of the mountains was above all a high, completely white peak that impressed itself on me.” (The Weisshorn, as its name suggests, really is a completely white peak. It is only fifteen kilometers north of the less bright and less high, but more famous Matterhorn.) We are apt to believe that this phrase is not to be taken so literally, but in the context of his life, Schweizer, a mountaineer, kept up the special relationship to that very peak. And as in later life the imaging power of the mountains concentrated itself more and more inside a limited region, their appearance gained in impressive power. (To be explicit, that locality was the Lötschental, where, together with friends, he had a hut on Tellialp. From vantage points in that region the beloved

white peak comes into view.) His last sentence compares his enchantment with that of the most wonderful music. Schweizer was a great violinist, keen on playing Bach, so his allusion to music may be taken seriously; in listening we attend to what is communicating itself to us. And further, on the occasions he describes as demanding utmost exertion, it is clear that a reciprocal relationship was being kept up. All in all, in this particular thread of his life he felt himself being accompanied: as a child, as a demanding and responsible alpinist, and in an even more conscious way as having concentrated his interest in the surroundings of that primitive hut on Tellialp.

Another thread of Hans Rudolf Schweizer's biography led him to retire prematurely from teaching Latin, Greek, and philosophy in high school in order to tend to more urgent needs. A new main occupation developed: serving individuals in need of help. These were people who had fled their homes far away from Switzerland, escaping armed conflicts of ethnic nature. He was always busy doing legal paper work for refugees, visiting some in prison awaiting expulsion, paying for urgently needed medical care, even personally establishing a store which was to give a Tamil a livelihood. He invited a Tamil family to live in his house, and they are still there, now as Swiss citizens, thanks to his initiative. When Schweizer died in 2001, friends inherited some of the problems that beset the family.

Biography as the Work of Company

We have been dealing with the theme of Company from the beginning. In the first chapter Ron told about the chemistry professor who recognized in his young student's passion for sensible qualities an attitude closer to medieval alchemy than to proper chemistry. Later Ron was reminded of this incident by the morphologist who told him who he really is: an "appreciator of nature." Looking back, it became clear to Ron that his professors had understood and expressed his problem better than he could himself. It was as if, in those short interviews, people who hardly knew Ron had recognized him, and had formulated their recognition in spoken words that resounded through years of his life.

Similarly, in "A Physicist Discovers Aesthetics" (chapter 5) I related how the steps in my path led eventually to my becoming one of the authors of this book. The roles of many people are now apparent to me. They led me forward, not knowing that they were agents helping to blaze this singular path.

Both Ron and Stephen met me in Dornach. Ron had come there in 1971 to write his thesis, "Towards a Common Morphology for Aesthetics and Natural Science: A Study of Goethe's

Empiricism.” I had not long previously become a co-worker at the Natural Science Institute at the Goetheanum, and I told him about my colleague Jochen Bockemühl’s studies of plant growth. Through these studies Ron became deeply interested in patterns of leaf formation and transformation. He in return showed me how intentionality works when we look at artistic creations such as those of Brancusi.

Ten years later, Stephen visited Dornach during summer vacation, and we met. Already a physics teacher, he became interested in what I was doing. In the years since Ron’s visit I had developed various tools for teaching phenomenon-based physics, including novel experiments and appropriate trains of thought. A long-lasting friendship ensued as we cooperated at conferences and co-authored *The Marriage of Sense and Thought*.

How the Turn in My Path Came About

None of this would have happened had I not been at Dornach. A special moment in my life first brought me to Dornach directly after I gained my doctorate in Munich. Sitting in the audience of an engineer, I learned about his quite surprising lines of research. The work did not at all fit into the physics I knew. Although I had never been interested in such unconventional questions, the man caught my attention. When he finished speaking, I found myself remaining in the room and beginning a conversation with him. It turned out that he was looking for a proficient co-worker at his laboratory, so I offered my help. Before the lecture, I had no idea that any such work was even to be imagined. I was simply following an urge to help this man. At the same time I had no knowledge of the basis of his understanding. All I could contribute to his projects was some experience in experimental work. That I did not act in furtherance of my intended career is rather surprising. I responded instead to an unexpected meeting with a fellow human being. After I had spent a year in Dornach, this line of research proved mistaken, and I felt I had wasted a full year. But I was lucky enough to be given a second chance to participate in the physics for which I was professionally trained.

Something else had contributed to my reckless decision—another “bad” experience. I had been great friends with a girl. We were both interested in a new method of inquiry into the world, anthroposophy, and she was better at it than I. She was studying architecture at the same Munich Technical University and we met almost daily. I had gotten used to our sharing of thoughts and interests. Then suddenly she found the man who was to become her husband, and he was not me. It took me months to get over the loss. Being alone was extremely hard, and I

needed human company. During this difficult time, I finished my thesis and was examined by the faculty. Although I must have been nervous, I must also have been grateful for the company of the examiners. In any case, after I was asked to leave the room they eventually decided to award me highest merits. I am convinced that had I not been in such a destabilized state I would never have taken that first step away from a professional academic career in physics. In the long run, the reckless decision of a destabilized man brought him the seeds of experience he would need to develop long years after.

Company in a Single Encounter

Company sounds like a group of people surrounding you whom you know personally. And for the account of how the authors came to meet and how we received help from an event in my past, this is true. The following short tale is about a single encounter with a person who you might think remained a stranger. But it would be wrong to assume that the encounter had no long-term effect—or that the stranger has not accompanied me up to the present.

Someone may show us that what we have been doing habitually day after day is, viewed from a new perspective, inappropriate. The Goetheanum in Dornach, near Basel, Switzerland, is a sublime and unique edifice that stands on a lofty site on a ridge, with access roads coming from below on two sides. My workplace was on the road from the north, whereas my home was to the south. I used to drive over the hill, passing the building at least four times a day. But it often happened that visitors to the grounds would pass by my workplace, itself of striking architecture, and ask to be shown around. One young American, clad in a hippiesque outfit, was greatly interested. We had a nice conversation, and when leaving he incidentally asked me which path he should follow to ascend to the Goetheanum. Since we were standing beside the road, I replied that he could continue along it from here. He was very much surprised, asking me, “Do people *drive* to the building?” I understood him immediately. It was as if a stroke of lightning had flashed. From then on, I was careful never to drive over that hill again. And giving up driving to work, and later giving up the use of a car altogether, I did get to know how shame may aid us in taking up the hints Company intimates to us. As a matter of fact, the young man’s utterance eventually had a great effect in drastically reducing direct access to the building by car—but that is a long story.

Company: the Realistic Concept of Society

I have been pointing out that Company brings us substantial ingredients of our biographical habitat. In customary language, we say “society” when referring to Company in the most general way. Now it is worth stressing that as soon as we recognize the broader mass of human beings as in some way potential messengers of our own future tasks, every encounter with another individual gains an element of expectancy and existential value. Then it becomes interesting to look at how civilization is tending either to support human encounters or, on the contrary, to make them obsolete. We can observe both tendencies.

Statistically, the population of the earth is not only growing, but also being concentrated in densely inhabited areas. Fewer people remain in rural regions, where agriculture is either becoming mechanized or is being given up. Nature is no longer the normal human environment. We increasingly move within human-made physical and social structures. What is more, urban concentration is taking place in the so-called underdeveloped world, where only the most primitive huts shelter many city-dwellers. Under such conditions people get plenty of chances to meet. Most of the time, they are in close contact with other people’s voices, their looks, expressions, and actions. It seems that the human environment consists more and more of Company in these places.

In the more developed world, people are also distancing themselves from nature. But here civilization is developing a practical way of life that tends to reduce the opportunities for direct physical encounters. Technology in connection with a rising consciousness for economic efficiency has brought us to interact more and more with robots, that is, automatic machines of some sort. Thus, for example, we are gaining practice in doing almost everything via the Internet. We have almost done away with the shop or bank counter, across which people used to do business face-to-face. Time spent in contact with the electronic media tends to be time devoid of authentic human interaction. While the automobile bridges ever greater distances, it secludes us from one another. On the whole, while our practical dependence on society grows deeper, we are losing contact with real people.

We cannot offer further advice here concerning practical steps in overcoming such growing alienation from real experience and from human relations. Skeptics may suggest that the blessings of loneliness within the developed world will not be sustained ad infinitum. At present, threats to bodily health in the environment of technical civilization tend to be discussed by many in great detail: global warming, genetically modified food, hazards of electronic contamination, fine particles in the air, and all too many others. What is overlooked in all this is another danger

—namely, the danger that we will lose the kind of life-sustaining experience that only human encounters can bring us.

This book is about the value of our own activity in gaining experience. The theme of Company suggests a new understanding of who we are that can lead us far beyond sole identification with our bodies. We can learn to identify ourselves with the Company that shapes the course of our lives. Every person we meet is in some way or another, an opportunity for us to develop life more fully, while at the same time becoming more entangled in the Company of others.