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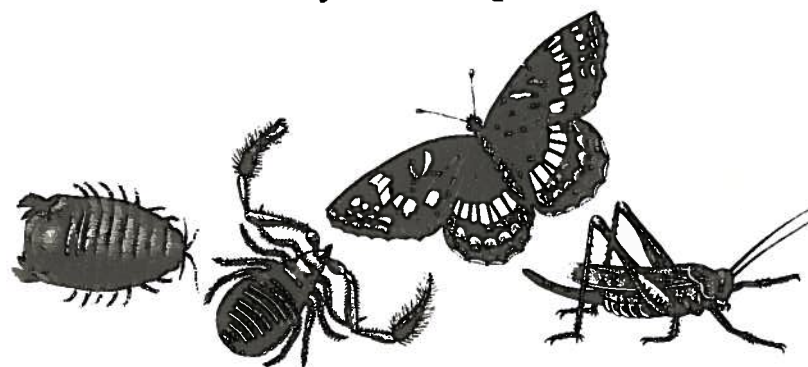
NATURE AND MADNESS

THE SACRED PAW: THE BEAR IN NATURE, MYTH AND LITERATURE,
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THE OTHERS: HOW ANIMALS MADE US HUMAN

A Paul Shepard Reader
**THE ONLY WORLD
WE'VE GOT**

edited by Paul Shepard



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PREFACE

FOR REASONS that are not entirely clear, much of my adult life has been marked by allusion to the past, consciously in more recent years, by inference always. I suspect that this was in part a habit shaped by three years of military service in World War II when I was first out of high school, and by the remembrances and the enduring idealism fostered by this experience. I arrived at my twenty-first year suffering from two kinds of inquietude. One was a lament for the land and its fate, a painful sense of the vanishing wild and, what had seemed to me as a boy, its perfection, a yearning that made me a typical target for the antienvironmentalist accusation that "nature lovers" are incurably fixated on nostalgia for an illusory past. My academic interest in the study of the romantic poets, painters, and travelers, who represent a special attitude toward nature, was a sort of professional extension of this predilection and its yeasty intuition. The second, more provocation than uneasiness, was generated by the study of biological evolution and a growing sense of my own distant ancestry, no less emotionally felt than the lost landscapes of my childhood, and yet intellectually satisfying in a way that no other religious ideas are.

I spent a lot of time with frogs and fish and reptiles, more still with birds and mammals. These boyhood companions are also relicts of a past out of whose primal darkness I too have come, and with whom I still share the world. I don't doubt that I created a concept of human evolution from my own ontogeny and have seen my personal sensibilities as arising in analogous ways to the origins of consciousness in the human species. I am aware that such atavistic thinking is widely disapproved, that science scorns the notion that

"ontogeny repeats phylogeny." Yet that despised idea drives my fascination with human prehistory. To have lived through a large part of the twentieth century, with its catastrophes of violence and greed, is to have realized ruefully that during the three million years of the Pleistocene—the era of our becoming—humankind was few in number, sensitive to the seasons and other life, humble in attitude toward the earth, and comfortable as one species among many. Group size was ideal for human relationships and human freedom, health was good despite (or perhaps because of!) high infant mortality rates, diet was in accord with our omnivorous physiology and sapient flexibility, and our ecology was stable and nonpolluting. These generic sensibilities are with us still, unmediated, at levels prior to what the social sciences celebrate as "culture." Humans all share a prototypic or archetypal relationship to nature. It was shaped by a lifeway of hunting and gathering, in which the season of personal existence from birth to death was celebrated as a small cycle within that of the larger universe.

Yet we have been led to think that the true self is largely free from biology—from "determinism"—as though our biology were a kind of tyranny that we can deny. Our industrial culture tells us daily that we can do anything we want, create our world according to taste, make any sexual and social relationships, and become whatever self pleases us: all this on the grounds that we are fundamentally different from other life. Periods of such swagger come and go, but none has resulted in such devastation as the ecological insolence of the last century. At last the new genetics and molecular biology reconfirm our bonds to the past. We are whatever our DNA—in response to our environment—makes us. The impact of being 99 percent identical in DNA to the chimpanzee and 80 percent identical even to horses falls on us with staggering impact. Even the lizard is represented in our presence, although we are "only" its cousin. Of course, DNA does not operate in a vacuum: the genetical heritage is con-

stantly interfacing with our experience and environment. The old question of nature or nurture was always pointless, as the constraints are biological and the opportunities are circumstantial.

The hunter-gatherer context of our emergence was based on primate omnivory. Our teeth, alimentary system, metabolism bear it out; neither carnivore, nor herbivore, nor frugivore, nor granivore, we are all these at once. To get by on a diet of any one of these is to be either painfully stressed and malnourished or preoccupied with substitutions and additives. To willfully "be" an herbivore—i.e., a vegetarian—is a special arrogance masquerading as ethics. Even within omnivory it is possible to get the proportions wrong or to be misled in the quality of foods, for instance, to overdo on meat or to omit fruit. Or worse, to eat plants and animals of varieties bred for appearance, size, keeping, or the convenience of machines, which tend to be deficient in nutritional value *because* our bodies are keyed to the wild varieties of our evolutionary past, of which they are the depleted representatives.

To harvest any food is to kill living beings. This realization has become painful to us because of our lack of a philosophy of death as part of life and because in industrial societies we pay someone else to do the killing. Such a philosophy would include not only the moral necessity of killing, as the source of life, but recognition that we too are food. This continuity is basic to the whole of organic existence; the kinship of life requires it. Embalming, that civilized nicety pioneered by the ancient Egyptians and made law by us, is a desperate hope of escaping the cycle of bodily existence. Cremation is a half effort in the same direction.

In societies in which people individually kill their own food (be it the embryos in seeds or whole animals) there is no escape from the physical network; the perception, acknowledgment, and finally embrace of the hard truth as part of an affirmation of life. Thus the killing and eating of other beings is understood by most tribal

peoples as part of a larger gift of life rather than a victory over nature or submission to a "bestial" nature. The individual hunter is not solely responsible, nor is she who tears the root from the ground or pulverizes the seeds more to blame than those who share the feast. Rites of celebration, purification, homage and veneration are group-wide. Virtually all religious concerns for these matters, among such peoples, bond death to both physical and spiritual renewal in some way or other.

The celebration of Pleistocene life (human life before twelve thousand years ago) seems to always hit two snags. One is that there are "no universals." I was made painfully aware of this objection at a large public meeting in Washington, D.C., in 1978 when, having given what I thought was a good paper on child development in primitive societies, I was assailed before the audience by Margaret Mead. The famous anthropologist, garbed in huge-brimmed hat, a flowered mumu reaching to the floor, and carrying a six-foot staff, was utterly regnant. "We all know there are *no universals*," she sniffed, and down I went. For years I dreamed of the reply I should have made, then I began to realize that she was mouthing the conventional wisdom not only of anthropology and the social sciences in general, but of modern society. Of course there are no universals: not everyone is born with two legs. Species characteristics were of no interest to most anthropologists, who were hell-bent on the study of cultural differences.

Hunter-gatherers may not always live in perfect harmony with nature or with each other, nor are they always happy, content, well-fed, free from disease, or profoundly philosophical. Like people everywhere, they are in some sense incompetent. Some tribes live in fringe environments that place special stress on their humanity. Deep tropical forests and the extreme arctic are such places, if one is to judge from the examples of homicide, suicide, sexual and child abuse. But these hardly compare to the destitution and demoralization of the

human personality, the total amount of human suffering in modern cities, or the catastrophes of industrial greed that have so impaired natural and human life in the name of progress everywhere in the arctic and the tropics. We should not be mistaken about our terms. It is not technology or materialism that is the problem. The love of materials and the physical world and the extraordinary craftsmanship in its use have made us human. By catastrophes of industrial greed I refer to the corporate organization of the economy, with its destruction of the human community, its blindness to place, its obscene disregard for scale, its garbage, its rapacity, and its excessive desire for "products." Worst of all, these chronic disasters create a bizarre double bind in which people believe that the solution to their problems lies in more of the same, so that the collapse of human dignity and the ravaging of its environment are perceived as evidence of insufficient industrial growth.

The second snag in the acceptance of the Pleistocene as a model is that "you can't go back." As a student I knew about time's arrow and evolution. Extending that to social process seems only natural. It worried me for years. Then it finally came to me why it was wrong. It is not necessary to "go back" in time to be the kind of creature you are. The genes from the past have come forward to us. I am asking that people change not their genes but their society, in order to harmonize with the inheritance they already have.

Finding practical ways to translate our DNA into environments is difficult. Five minutes into this subject and my students immediately start asking, "All right, what do we do?" After forty years I feel that I am only beginning to understand the problem. As Ivan Illich says of his social critiques, I have spent my whole life trying to understand these matters, working on the nature of the question. How we got where we are and where we came from is part of the problem.

There were a few people some years ago who began to doubt that the rise of agriculture was the "greatest human revolution." Indeed,

historians have generally credited the emergence of agriculture with the very possibility of civilization, that is, supporting the necessary density of people to have cities. For two centuries they have blandly repeated and foisted on the public this ideology of progress, the same old assumptions about literacy, inventiveness, security from want and natural dangers, leisure, great art, political organization, health, and so on through the litany of good things. Reality is the opposite. At the level of the individual, the quality of human life began to deteriorate with the domestication of plants and animals. In the shift from primal human groups to states we graduated from homicide to war, from murder to genocide, from family hunger to the starvation of populations, from diversity in every aspect of life to homogeneity, from sickness as individual organic failure or parasites to mass epidemic death, from council and group-centered power to the hierarchy of empires, from occasional craziness to group insanity.

But of course we cannot believe that. The ideology of progress and the double bind of the industrial catastrophes commit us not only to what we strive for but to what we reject. The issue is one not only of public mood and emotion but of philosophy and religion; it implicates historical changes in paradigms of organicism and mechanism, of the nature of deity and of the spirit, of the meaning and purpose of life, of what it means to be human. If philosophy guides action then events make philosophy. We cannot blame our concepts for our actions, but we cannot overlook them either.

My own take on this is that a basic economy is a generator of values. Before agriculture there was only one economy. Despite the majority of twentieth-century social opinion to the contrary, generalizations can be made about that primal way of life and its beliefs and cultures. When people began cultivating plants, moving from a world of perennials to annuals, they created a new mode of perceiving reality, an altered sense of time. For example, an economy based on annual plants has an amputated perspective on the future.

Botanically it centered on hardy, quick-growing, short-lived plants, takers from the soil, not givers, dependent on man-created fields, on disturbance and uniformity rather than diversity. Likewise, domesticated animals were a deformed fauna with exaggerated features (milk-giving and plow-pulling), reduced social and physical requirements, diminished intelligence, vulnerability to epidemic disease and psychopathology. Inevitably this led to their infantilizing. Humans replaced their surround of wild diversity, maturity, and a rich, mysterious Other in elaborate webs of life, with a simplified biota of a few species, dependent on humans for their existence.

Is it any wonder that we came to think of the natural world as inferior, as created by a human-like deity, as an enemy to our civilized interests? What could religion do in such circumstances but invent God the maker, place evil in the wilderness, reserve the soul as a human possession, and locate heaven somewhere else? What could philosophy do but abandon the natural world altogether and become obsessed with the ethics among humans or their obligations to their gods? Instead of "nature," a random play of forces, how much better a mathematicized, abstracted, and alphabetized world?

The main certainty in the agricultural, civilized world was overwhelming uncertainty. Would the one-crop seeds come up? Would the weather be right or disease wipe out the plants? Would flood wash it all away? Would there be adequate labor for tilling, seeding, weeding, cultivating, fertilizing, harvesting, hauling, storing, and distributing—or would the labor force be drafted for war or die from communicable disease? Would enemies burn the fields again? In the boom-or-bust economy of all agriculture (except perhaps its "garden" form), nature in the bad years seemed to withhold (like a cruel mother) that to which the farmer felt he had a right. Or on the contrary, the earth (like a good mother) nourished the people as they hoped. Does this analogy not imply the infantilization of human thought?

The worldview of early farmers centered on the earth's fecundity. The seed was analogous to semen, the rain or sun to paternity, the earth to the womb, sowing to impregnation, cultivation to gestation. These ideas marked a shift away from a previous epiphany of wild plants and animals toward the deification of the human figure. The transition reflected the idea that sacred power was exercised by a being with human characteristics who relished power and obeisance in ways and to an extent that sacred animals did not. And because of the association of the female with the reproductive earth, the first sculpted humanized deities were probably female.

Yet there is a benign quality in subsistence farming that attracts us still, a nourishing, protecting sense that seems somehow associated with nonviolence, appealing to the feminine and the caregiver in us all. How can we explain the fear and hatred of the natural world in the light of this feeling we have about the soil and its cultivation? The answer is in part that we are the victims of the fiction of the "happy yeoman." More importantly, the animal-keeping side of agriculture is the source of masculinization, which historically produced the patriarchal tone in Western culture. Herding is not so much concerned with the fecundity and nurturance of the soil as with the possession of livestock, the control of resources amid endless conflict and chafing. The dominant male god arose in pastoral cosmology and defeated the goddess as nomadic pastoralists sundered sedentary peoples again and again during the six thousand years after the domestication of the horse and the llama. Mounted, herders became the first cavalry, as professionals completing the one element that the kings of the ancient agricultural states lacked. As these conquerors transformed sedentary society there was for them not a good and a bad side to the feminine but a schizoid split of her into the mother and the prostitute, an ambivalence fired with an overheated sense of female virginity, male honor, and vengeance. The modern forms of

"pastorality" are the corporation and the politics of power, traditionally male provinces in which the earth and woman are reduced to objects of ownership.

Some anthropologists have been quick to observe that "gender wars" occur in all societies, but in truth most hunter-gatherer groups show little actual subordination of women, and the matter is frequently treated with humor. Councils of the whole are not unusual. "Vernacular gender" is the rule, which is to say, different gender tasks but not suppression.¹ Modern gender wars are different because pastorality was on a different track in defeating the goddess and raising men to gods, and by inference subordinating women to men.

This turn of mind "invented" ritual sacrifice, the attempt to placate or obtain favors from a sacred power by offerings, by bargaining with an arbitrary—a "royal"—power. What had been participation among foragers became manipulation. The cosmic game changed from chance to strategy, from measuring one's state of grace in nature's bounty to bartering, from a sacramental gift to a negotiated blessing.

Clearly, the "new" relationship to nature (one three-hundredth of human time since the beginning of the Pleistocene) leads to the necessity of control. The idea of regulating one's body, pests, predators, plants, animals, and microclimates is familiar to us but is relatively new to the human mind, and it may lead to an intoxication with power. If the farmer can destroy his competitors, be they beetles, fungi, birds, or deer, and the pastoralist-rancher can kill lions and wolves, they will be inclined to do so. Wild things become adversaries; they take up space, sunlight, or water that the farmer can use for his crops, or they invade the crops, eating, trampling, or infecting them with disease. As soon as people began to kill wolves to protect sheep and to squash grasshoppers ("locusts") to protect crops, nature became an opponent and wild forms became enemies of the

tame in ways analogous to a war between human armies. The domain of power is a continuum, extending from control of people to control of all the Others, in which the only outcome is surrender or domination.

It is very difficult for us, removed by so many generations from our hunter-gatherer forebears, not to project the fear of nature upon them. If wild nature is threatening, how much worse we think for those primitive people who had no buildings, guns, or chemicals, who "must" have spent much of their lives cowering in caves. But the evidence is to the contrary. Protection by black magic, voodoo against evil, even the late forms of shamanistic defense against demons, and ritual sacrifice are characteristic of planters and herders, not hunters.

Another side to this mentality is the premise of the "limited good." This is a way of understanding the given world as insufficient for the wants or needs of people. The constant shadow of scarcity, fundamental to modern economics, arose in the era of agriculture. It was not a fundamental human condition. Lean times may have occurred among primitive peoples, as they do occasionally among all species, but in general small numbers, ecological flexibility, and the richness of the earth worked toward stability among the primal groups. Culturally we have inherited an inability to see that our human numbers are at the root of our problems, directly in the form of insufficiency of all kinds, but also through the fallout in the form of social chaos: tyranny, the little wars everywhere, deprivation, human abuse, terrorism, and poverty.

Despite some feminist insistence, bringing back the Neolithic goddess is not the solution to our present troubles. True, we need new stories and enactments, new myths and rituals. But insofar as these are fundamental communications to ourselves of what we most deeply believe, their veracity and power will depend on convictions

of the heart, growing out of instinct or inherent psychogenic sources which come from ways of life. This is why "New Age" efforts to start with rites and resurrect old tribal myths will not work in changing our attitudes toward the earth. We may dance the Maypole till the cows come home but it will not recover for us the sense of the cycle of the seasons, which can only be regenerated in our own context.

The myth that epitomizes our present beliefs is the myth of history. Historical events are not the myth of history, but are merely its data. The story—the myth—of history is that change and time are inextricably linear. Created and set in motion by an outsider, the world goes on toward its end, as Buckminster Fuller said, "utopia or oblivion." This "maker" or "potter" story denies the self-creating character of planetary systems, of life in its most creative sense. It is a declaration of independence from the deep past (prehistory) and its peoples, from primal tribes today or ancestors long dead. History denies the earth as our true home and regards nonhuman life as incidental to human destiny.

For history the alternative to itself is in a "*heart of darkness*." Joseph Conrad's novel is a terrifying adventure into history's idea of the primitive soul given a geographical setting in the tropical jungle, where the male, rational, corporate mind confronted wild savages who personified their own inmost emotions and impulses—their instincts. This fear of the wild self was supported by Sigmund Freud's misguided notion of aggressive and destructive beasts living in the wilderness of the unconscious: no place for a civilized person. Yet we are not happy in our present situation. Could it be that those beasts are terrible not because of their nature but because they are contained? Our spontaneous sense of connectedness to nonhuman life—itsself positive and not fearful—should make us feel at home on earth. The problem may be more difficult to understand than to solve. A journey beneath the veneer of civilization would not reveal the bar-

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barian but our ("romantic") recollection of a good birth, a rich plant and animal environment, the reception of food as a gift rather than as a product. The generic human in us knows how to dance the animal, knows the strength of clan membership and the profound claims and liberation of daily rites of thanksgiving. Hidden from history, this secret person is undamaged in each of us and may be called forth by the most ordinary acts of life.

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