Abstract

Rabindranath’s enormous corpus of varied work has been widely understood as that of a poet, a writer, a playwright, a musician and a man of letters. He has only rarely been interpreted as a philosopher, and almost never as an ecological philosopher. Preliminary research shows that he is perhaps India’s first modern ecological philosopher - at growing odds with modernity.

The essay argues that Tagore’s perspectives and insights are unique and his intellectual contribution in this area is indispensable to an understanding of the ecological and spiritual implications of technological, industrial modernity. There are few thinkers during the last hundred years anywhere more relevant when it comes to teaching us the significance of how we relate to the natural world (including, needless to add, our very own bodies) and what it tells us about ourselves and the way we have come to live.

The focus in this paper is on what we can learn about Tagore’s outlook on the natural world and our relationship to it from a set of letters he wrote to his niece during his years as a young man, looking after his family estate in East Bengal (now, Bangladesh).

‘Nature hides God, but not from everyone’ - Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.¹

Today, when all the elements - air, water, earth and fire (if you think of climate change) - are being so rapidly, so severely poisoned, with a confidence and bravado only desperate vainglory can dare, it is more urgent than ever to draw on visions of human culture and ecology that might help us reflect anew on the conditions on which life has been given to humanity. It has become imperative to develop an ecological perspective on human society and economy instead of the other way around (wherein we normally view ‘the environment’ from the perspective of the economy, almost as an afterthought, as something cognitively and ontologically ‘outside’ of us, secondary to our desires). In this sense we need to see the world ‘right side up’ and refuse the customary cognitive inversion that a world obsessed with conquest, colonisation, and economic growth typically invites and seduces us to participate in. We are within nature, and nature is within us. This must be our starting point.²

In this task, Rabindranath Tagore’s varied contributions in multiple genres come to our aid. Viewing virtually everything from the perspective of the spirit, which involves, at once, seeing things *sub specie natura*, Rabindranath is able to see the culturally and ecologically destructive patterns of human life in modern industrial society. He expresses his concerns in a variety of registers. ‘The message of the forest’ is clear for Rabindranath. If we can learn to read it and look beyond ‘the reckless carnival of the present time’, human freedom may still be possible.³ Rabindranath’s enormous corpus of varied work has been widely understood as that of a poet, a writer, a playwright, a musician and a man of letters. He has only rarely been interpreted as a philosopher, and almost never as an ecological philosopher. Preliminary research shows that he is perhaps India’s first modern ecological philosopher – at growing odds with modernity. I will argue that Tagore’s perspectives and insights are unique and his intellectual contribution in this area is indispensable to an understanding of the ecological and spiritual implications of technological, industrial modernity. There are few thinkers during the last hundred years anywhere more relevant when it comes to teaching us the significance of how we relate to the natural world (including, needless to add, our very own bodies) and what it tells us about ourselves and the way we have come to live.

**The ecology of consciousness**

In this essay, what concerns me is not so much Rabindranath himself as what speaks through Rabindranath. For *what speaks through* Rabindranath – from time to time – is a potenti life-force of nature which discovers its true voice when it is able to find itself in (natural)

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surroundings with which it resonates. Words are found to express the poetry of the natural world, even as they, at once, disclose the secrets of the human soul. It is as though the living intelligence of nature - prakriti - herself finds its protagonist in the form of Rabindranath’s pen, revealing on the same pages the beats and notes, hues and shades of her eternal lila (play). The ecology of consciousness that this essay refers to is manifest in what speaks through Rabindranath. The word ecology existed in Tagore’s time. However, it was not part of popular usage, outside the confines of the 19th century European discipline founded by German naturalist Ernst Haeckel, and certainly not so in Bengal, where Tagore grew up. As one goes through the vast oeuvre of his writings one finds that Tagore had ecology – in the sense of a balanced wholeness of perceptual grasp – in his instincts. There is no form of art, music, poetry, literature or some other medium in which Rabindranath expressed himself in which nature, and more significantly, our relationship to nature, does not play a central role. For Rabindranath nature does not have to be ‘re-enchanted’. It was never disenchanted, to begin with. Nature is his ever reliable muse. Even his non-fiction or political writings make much more sense when one views things, with Tagore, sub specie natura and grasps the ecology of consciousness which speaks through the poet. Such an ecology of consciousness reveals itself not only in the patterns of thought emerging from a naturalist vision of life. It is also manifest in an understanding of the multiple drives of human consciousness when it works in a perverse direction. All this lends to Tagor-e’s words – especially his rich and evocative descriptions of his experience of nature – the appropriate perspective in which to absorb his vision and the ideas to which it gives birth.

Consciousness, for Rabindranath, is not merely human. There is an infinite metaphysical domain accessible to a particular human consciousness, when the latter is duly attuned to the divine. In the freedom of access to this lies spiritual liberation, in so far as Rabindranath is concerned. He is always interested in finding the infinite at the heart of the finite in the world in which humans find their three-dimensional existence. It is in the constant longing for a state of being which facilitates this awakening of consciousness, when the infinite reveals itself in its full glory, that man, as a spiritual being, finds his highest endeavour. And enlightenment consists of the abiding attainment of such a unified state of being and consciousness. This, for Rabindranath, is perfection itself. The presence of nature is essential, he finds, to the discovery of such a unity.

Modern consciousness

What about ‘modern consciousness’, another term used in the sub-title of this essay? According to Rabindranath, modern consciousness lives under the influence of a typically modern contagion, the virus of (a very worldly) power, and all that it plans, generates, oversees and reflects – or fails to reflect – upon. This consciousness is, thus, inhibited in its cognition at the very root. It longs for the infinite - which is what the endless proliferation of (marke-table) objects of desire in our consumerised age reveals. However, its unceasing tragedy lies in the fact that it can never actually find it this way, though it always seems to be, like the proverbial mirage, just over the horizon. Power can never find the infinite because it is unable to step out of its own way, which alone can disclose the infinite (to borrow a verb from Heidegger and Arendt). As Plato said, man himself stands in the way of the light which
alone can illuminate his life. There is a crisis in late modern consciousness which is rooted in the Promethean hubris of power, in the attempts of human desire to seek the infinite in directions and places from where the latter naturally shies away, almost as a child might close her eyes where the sun is too strong. This desperate vainglory, and the consciousness and global *geist* that goes with it, has precipitated in a very short span of time, perhaps less than a few generations, a planetary ecological crisis of cataclysmic proportions. This crisis has everything to do with the modern obsession with power, and thus, with warfare and the resultant barbarism. The crisis worsens every time there is a major world event – because every previous crisis has been handled symptomatically, without taking pause to reflect on the root historical and cultural causes of the disease of modern civilisation, which remain skillfully undiagnosed. Tagore has much to say to this ‘modern consciousness’, especially by way of contrast with the pristine potential consciousness of which it is a desperate parody. To excavate some of the key features of this pristine consciousness is the goal of the bulk of this essay.

**Rabindranath’s notion of truth**

Behind the myriad strivings in the life and work of Tagore is a single, unifying purpose: it is the quest for the self-realisation of humanity. This, and this alone, is the ultimate meaning of existence as far as Tagore is concerned. This would be his simple answer to Nietzsche’s anxiety ‘Why Man?’ Humanity exists in order to realise itself *in truth*.

This is expressed simply enough. But what does it mean in more elaborate terms? The way human life is normally lived - especially in digitally fragmented, twenty-first century modernity - lends to it an inescapable quality of separateness, alienation and estrangement, atomization and particulation. As human and other beings we are distinct from each other. This distinction is denoted by the appearance of each in a separate physical form with a distinct trajectory of life from birth until death. One might describe this ensemble of physical destinies as the *discrete order of social reality*.

However, appearances deceive, unless understood as reflections of the real. It is Rabindranath’s contention that this discrete order of seeming separateness hides a far greater truth which goes to make up the unity of all existence. At the ultimate level of a fully awakened consciousness, not only is all humanity One, existence itself is One. For Rabindranath the truth of the ultimate unity of being overrides all phenomenal appearances of disparate entities. If this great truth is normally hidden from our awareness, it is because the latter is normally subject to forces of the world which usually succeed in serving as a veil that hides the greater reality of the *unifying order of consciousness*.

How do the forces of the world obscure this truth? The world - and ever more in the 21st century – readily traps our minds in a tangle of shadows and illusions, desires and passions, half-truths and lies such that their mutual volley obscures the deeper spiritual truth of unity.

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We are unable to summon the psychic and psycho-somatic energy needed to apprehend the living unity of existence. Living in a human world like ours subjects us to a spell-binding phantasmic hypnosis whereby the contingent realities of time and space assume in our awareness the place of the greater truth of existence. Some vain ambition, greed, desire or lust saturates our awareness to hide the greatest of truths which alone renders life ultimately meaningful. As happens in a mesmerising theatre-performance, the shadow-play of everyday humanity – with its abiding habits and persuasive patterns – becomes all too real as the true depths recede into apparent oblivion, taking on the unbelievable guise of falsehood. In Tagore’s own words,

Man’s prime strength is in religion. Man’s prime humanity is spiritual. The physical and material in man is dependent on time and space, but not so the spiritual - which is eternal. The realisation that we are part of the eternal, that we are not just scattered little little beings, is what makes for spirituality...it is not possible to cheat the eternal. The truth, the eternal, shall always be there. Lies are of man’s own making.5

What does truth mean to Tagore? He says ‘we have been taught by our sages that it is Truth that saves man from annihilation’.6 So what is truth? Rabindranath refers to it as “the Supreme Being” who permeates the world - ‘Satyam’.7 He writes that man, being a soulful creature,

follows his instinct for ultimate truth - for ultimate, not ulterior values. Our faith is in the infinite…8

The negation of ‘ulterior values’ is crucial to the stance Tagore adopts, for he makes a clear distinction between ‘truth’ and ‘fact’. ‘Evil instincts’, he suggests could be ‘facts’; but there is a truth deeper and greater than them. It is this truth which has ‘ultimate’ value and which ultimately interests him.9 This truth stands above him, above us, as the infinite to the finite. We can discover the infinite and be touched by it. We can be possessed by it, but we can never possess it. So the discovery of the infinite in the folds of the finite is what a true human life consists in. Along the lines of such a quest – inevitably involving an appropriate sacrifice - might lie true human freedom. All our true enjoyment is in the realisation of perfection. This can be reached not through augmentation, but through renunciation of the material for the sake of the ideal.10

Such a quest - beyond all ‘augmentation’, number and measure – can only redeem itself if it serves the greater truth: ‘the thing to do is to serve the supreme truth of goodness, of

7 Ibid, p. 147.
8 Ibid, p. 58.
9 Ibid, p. 58.
beauty and of love.” The truth Rabindranath has in mind does not allow moral passivity. It generates an active conscience at once ethical and aesthetically sensitive. This conscience must find its moral energy to challenge the ugly facts of the human world from a source in the human soul which lies deeper than the origin of these facts. And this is why the distinction between facts and truth is all-important to Tagore. On a visit to China he reminds his hosts

Seek righteousness even though success be lost. I believe this not through the evidence of facts. Facts mislead and oppress you with mere numbers and quantity; but the world of personality surpasses facts on every side.

For Tagore, unlike for a lot of Western philosophy, questions of truth and value are inseparable from one another. The human personality is inescapably engaged, at once, in both truth and value. And while facts (with all the associated numbers and quantities) are contingent, truth is essential, and beyond all measure and number:

Truth comes from above, it is conscious of infinity and is creative. We have accepted and followed and venerated men who gave us such truth, and lost success. We need to hear this again and again, and never more than now in this modern world of slavery and cannibalism in decent guise: By the help of unrighteousness men do prosper, men do gain victories over their enemies, men do attain what they desire, but they perish at the root (Emphasis in original).

The place of nature in self-realisation

Humanity, Rabindranath feels, needs nature not merely for its material needs. We need nature as much for our self-realisation. Without such a realisation, humanity remains profoundly unfulfilled, since we are ultimately, Tagore points out, spiritual beings, who must either discover and live by such a truth, or be haunted by its absence. In late corporate modernity, this absence often wears the mask of the ‘private’. As Hannah Arendt, borrowing a page from the Ancients, has noted sharply, a life circumscribed by the private realm, as has rapidly come to become the global norm in our time, deprives humanity of its fullness of dignity and stature. Privatisation also implies privation. The increasing ‘privatisation’ of the human being steals from us some of the essentials of a fully human life - for humanity is fully free only when there is also a public life with authentic disclosure on all sides.

Torn and rendered remote from nature, living in highly processed man-made envi-
ronments (such as the global hardware - and software - of modernity effectively enforces to
today), humanity can never come into its own and be liberated from its illusions. Alienated
from the natural world, it becomes spiritually impoverished and will thus, in time, render
human cultures ecologically unsustainable. Rabindranath’s ecological ethics and aesthetics -
not to forget his epistemology, metaphysics and ontology - are founded upon such a realiza-
tion. In the Chinnapatrabali, on which most of this essay is based, Rabindranath, relying on
faculties of the heart, shares with readers vivid maps of his inner life. In poetic prose he
shares the thoughts and feelings that life by the river Padma inspires in him.

Tagore’s phenomenology of nature

To make nature - typically experienced by a utilitarian industrial society as mute, if not
also inanimate - come alive takes an awakening of the poetic faculty in us. This cognitive
faculty resides more in the heart than in the mind. Human consciousness must expand
and the mind must deepen, and ultimately surrender unconditionally, to find the cognitive
capacity to perceive the living universe that unfolds. In the profoundest sense imaginable,
this living uni-verse cannot reveal itself to human consciousness unless and until it is well-
understood that cognition is not only pre-analytic; it is also pre-discursive. The all-important
experience un-folds without words and thoughts. In fact, the absence of words and thoughts
is essential for an authentic experience of nature to transpire. In the Chinnapatrabali, we
find Tagore’s im-agination at full stretch, glorying in the natural splendour of a much vaster
Bengal (than of today), the great Padma bifurcating the lush countryside with its ample sway.
In a remarkable letter written on a winter day from his family estate at Shelaidaha in 1895,
Rabindranath clearly articulates his feeling for nature. He speaks of a “walking companion”
who accompa-nies him on his evening walks by the Padma, and who seems to understand the
inspiration for Tagore’s poetry:

I was explaining to him the particular way in which I look at the world, that I have a very
intense, intimate, real and living relationship with all of nature…He correctly in-tuited the exact
source of my intoxication with this world (Emphasis added).16

So this is the epistemic economy – circumventing the peril of intellectualisation -
with which Rabindranath apprehends the natural world. Sometimes there is a lament for
humanity’s blindness and insensitivity to the glory and grandeur of it all. He writes from
Shelaidaha on an asharh17 day in 1892:

All these colours, this light and shade, this silent splendour spread across the sky,
this peace and beauty that fills the entire space between earth and heaven - how much
preparation all of this takes!...Such a huge and amazing affair happening every day outside,
and we cannot find a proper response to it within us! We live at such a far remove from
the universe!...The world in which I find myself is full of very strange human beings - they are all
occupied night and day with rules and building walls; they carefully put up curtains just in case their

17 A mid-summer season in the Hindu calendar.
eyes actually see anything - really the creatures of this world are very strange! (Emphasis added).  

This is not merely a poetic expression of regret. By offering an elaborate account of his own aesthetic delight, Rabindranath appears to be driving at the manner in which human society routinely represses its feelings for nature to the point where they cease to exist in its consciousness. And insofar as it does this, he is quite clear that it suffers spiritual impoverishment. A landscape speaks to us only when we can find the sympathetic patience to 'listen' to it, and discern its 'language'. This patience is possible only when time slows down and a certain minimum leisure is available. Rabindranath on his family estates in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) finds just this. On a summer morning, he writes from Shelaidaha:

This boat is like my old dressing gown – entering it one can enter a time of looseness and leisure - I think as I please, imagine what I please…

To bring his imagination into tune with the natural setting before him calls for reserves of patience, for, under the circumstances, haste would make much waste. There is a simple, yet difficult, lesson in happiness:

One can feel a certain motion in one's imagination for quite a while. If you become greedy and hurry, you are deprived of that joy.

Having grown up in India’s largest metropolis of his day, Calcutta, Rabindranath is very much a restless city-bred creature. However, every visit to rural Bengal – and they are long stays when we compare it to more recent times – bring for Rabindranath the languor to immerse himself in the beauty of the world by the Padma. He is able to reflect upon and unload his metropolitan baggage and meet the rural landscape with the freedom of a poetic heart:

Calcutta is very polite, very heavy, like a government office. Every day of one's life seems to emerge in the same shape, with the same stamp, freshly cut, one after another in the mint - dead, lifeless days, but very civilised, and all of the same weight. Here I am an outsider and every day here is my own day - it has no relation with the wound-up machine of everyday routine (Author's emphasis).

Outside, and yet, ever more inside. It is clear that it is not as easy to imagine, while living one’s daily life in the city, the rich nature and gentle pace of life in the countryside – even in those days – as one might assume.

Inner, mental changes are essential. Rabindranath has to free himself from the grip of words which ‘make the mind quite frantic’ producing ‘just the opposite effect of
The poet-philosopher is able to dwell in the experience to a degree which permits him to feel an intimate kinship with his surroundings, so much so that by reflecting on them he is able to enter into his own ‘inner mystery’. It inspires him to contemplate the wonder of his own existence and its resonance with the natural world outside:

The deep, ancient relationship we have with this earth, this sea – unless we sit down alone in nature, face-to-face with it, how do we ever understand it or feel it within our hearts? When there was no soil on this earth and the oceans were completely alone, my restless heart of today would have rocked silently upon the waves of that desolate sea…Unless one sits down alone under a free sky or on the shore of a vast ocean, one cannot experience one’s own hidden inner mystery properly…(Emphasis added).

In the presence of the river and the sky, the layers of his self reveal themselves to him like petals opening out to the morning sun. It is in this precise sense that the beneficent presence of nature is necessary, according to Rabindranath, for any authentic awareness of selfhood.

His realisation is that in our depths we are nature, if we can attune ourselves within to the right quality of consciousness. In many passages Tagore’s identification with the natural world is quite complete and trans-temporal. Writing from Shelaidaha in August 1892, he gazes at the Padma and recalls a time when ‘he’ was one with the world:

....the sunlight here makes those childhood memories of gazing at pictures come alive…it’s like a pulsating attachment with this vast earth – at a time when I was one with this world, when the greengrass rose on top of me, the sarat sunlight fell over me…I want to properly express the heartfelt affection and kinship I feel towards this world, but perhaps most people won’t understand it correctly - they may think it very weird. That’s why I don’t feel like trying (Emphasis added).

In the passage above, we get a glimpse of Rabindranath’s ‘somatic unconscious’. Matter and psyche become one in a single moment of experiential fullness.

The poet feels loved by the earth. A certain ease and comfort in nature follow. He is happily united with her. There is never a thought of separation and so, the fear that often arises from the anxiety brought on by impending separation, perhaps the birthplace in human consciousness of the impulse to dominate and control nature, is altogether absent. When de-scription is poetic and precise, it has the power to make analysis redundant. Such is the

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24 Ibid, Letter 70, p. 149 - 150.  
25 The notion of the ‘somatic unconscious’ is used here much like that of the subtle body (suksma shareer - as against sthul shareer - gross body) in Yoga. In Western psychology, Carl Jung has used the expression, while reflecting on the thought of Nietzsche [Carl Jung, Nietzsche's Zarathustra, Vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 441.]
evoc-ative capacity of Rabindranath’s descriptions. Nature intoxicates him. He gives way to
the flood-tide of inspiration, voicing sentiments which do not merely reveal the living nature
around him but, as much, the depths of the hidden heart and soul of the consciousness that
experiences her. There is, on many an occasion a remarkable unity between the two, so much
so that it often seems as though nature herself is making the poet paint her with words from
human language. The experience in question is not merely aesthetic. It is also mystical and
religious. Nature, for Rabindranath, is decidedly not an object, or even an infinitely large
collection of objects, as it is for most of modern thought both East and West, including for
most phenomenologists. For him, once and always, nature is a profoundly living intimate
experience. He never looks at it as a scientific, or indeed any, observer might look at it - from
the outside, as though that was even possible. There is barely any ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ when
he is living or describing the experience. So often, nature is experienced as profoundly
personified such as in this description of the Padma and its banks:

land and water approach each other slowly like two shy lovers – their timidity has al-
most overflowed, they are almost in an embrace now.

As a further instance along the same lines, consider this animated description of the
swollen Padma one shraban morning; he paints a rich and vivid canvas whose poetry
communicates an intuitive grasp of the balance of forces in nature, in addition to paying
tribute to the awe-some power concealed in them.

a freshly bathed spiritual figure of light seemed to be rising from the mysterious depths
of the water to stand in quiet beauty, and on the shore, black clouds that looked like a
lion with waving manes were sitting quietly, frowning, paws stretched out over the rice
fields, as if conceding victory to the beautiful celestial power, but not yet tamed – sitting
in one corner of the horizon with all its anger and pride coiled up.

It reminds one of Nietzsche’s evocations ‘if our senses were fine enough, we would
experience the slumbering cliff as a dancing chaos’. The intimacy with which Rabindranath
experiences the natural and the cosmic worlds sometimes reveals to the poet the silent
solitude of his own mind, even as he anticipates a familiar kinship with the evening:

today every liquid consonant of the gurgling river seems to be showering the softest
affection on every part of my body - my mind today is very solitary and completely
silent, and within me, a secret silence reigns stilly...I know that when in the evening
I pull up the easy chair to the roof of the boat to sit there alone, that evening star of
mine in my sky will appear before me like a member of my family! This evening of mine

26 For instance, Husserl himself, or even Heidegger in most places.
28 The season of the Hindu calendar roughly coterminous with August.
30 Quoted in Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh, *The Path: A New Way to Think About Everything*,
on the Padma is a very old acquaintance…

Here, Rabindranath gives us a glimpse of his inner sanctuary which also reveals - importantly - the sense in which nature is essential to the deepest layers of human self-discovery. There is a further problem, he realises. It has to do with the limits of language in communicating this deepest of all self-discoveries.

We have two lives – one is in the world of men, and the other in the world of thought. Many pages of the life story of that world of thought have I written upon the sky above the Padma. I can see that writing whenever I come here, and whenever I can be alone. When I come here I understand I have not been able to accomplish anything in my poems. I have not been able to express what I felt. That is because language does not belong to me alone - it belongs to everybody, but what I experience with my entire temperament isn’t experienced by everybody, so their language therefore cannot express my experience with any clarity (Emphasis added).

This is almost a reversal of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s realisation: ‘the limits of my language are the limits of my world’. Tagore might respond to his European admirer thus: ‘my most intimate world begins precisely where my language ends.’

As we know, we usually fail to realise how much our words use us, even as we vainly imagine we determine their purpose according to our own chosen requirements. Words have a (sometimes ghostly) life of their own. As Wittgenstein knew better than anyone else, language is always social property. There is no such thing as a private language. Speech already presumes the existence of at least one other person. This is why one sometimes feels that to speak to oneself in words is a little mad. Echoes of the same experience of coming upon the incommunicable within himself appear in yet other letters of Rabindranath. In one of them, again written from Shelaiddaha in the month of shraban, he shares an intimacy to reveal an-other instance of his experience of the larger mystery of life:

The sorts of feelings that arise in my mind when I am in the midst of nature seem to be beyond my own powers, my own character. That’s why I feel that I will never be able to explain it to anybody or make them believe it. All of my feelings have that ingredient of something that is more than me…

Does one get to know oneself better in the company of nature? Or does one get better acquainted with the awesome depth of one’s own ignorance – of oneself no less than of the natural world around us! – in her midst? Rabindranath looks at himself askance. One’s

34 Tagore was one of the few poets or writers Wittgenstein was fond of reading. See Ray Monk, *The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).
ignorance of oneself deepens dramatically when one gets to take a closer look. Rabindranath finds that so much of what one takes to be ‘oneself’ is in fact involuntary in the extreme. One’s will must acknowledge its bafflement when it beholds what happens in its immediate neighborhood. It is blinded by its own profound epistemic limits:

One feels very apprehensive when one thinks about the boundless mystery that is within one’s self...After a lot of thought I have come to the conclusion that I don’t know myself at all. I’m like a living piano, with lots of wires and mechanical bits inside me in the dark; I never know who comes and plays it, and it is difficult to completely comprehend why as well, I can only know what is playing – whether it’s happiness or sorrow, soft note or sharp, in rhythm or not - just that much. And I know how far up or down my octave will extend. No, do I know even that much? I’m not even sure if I am a sympathetic grand piano or a cottage piano (Author’s emphasis).  

When we encounter the natural world face to face, our ignorance is no less. One afternoon in Bolpur, Rabindranath wonders at bird-calls and what they could possibly mean:

The cuckoo has outdone itself – nobody has yet been able to fathom why it calls so continuously – obviously it’s not just for our pleasure....

Immanuel Kant would nod that we can never truly know ‘the thing-in-itself’. There are occasions when Rabindranath puzzles over our inability to know “everything”, or our inability to express ‘everything that’s on our minds’:

Sitting here alone, I cannot begin to express the boundless peace and beauty I see within all of this. There is one lot that becomes restless thinking, ‘Why can’t I know everything about the world?’ and there is another lot that is frustrated wondering ‘Why can’t we say everything that’s on our minds?’– in between what the world has to say stays within the world and the inner thought stays within...

Overall, the poet is at peace with his sense of wonder. Speaking of our epistemic limits, they become yet more formidable when it comes to knowing other human beings - as much a part of nature, and even more like icebergs sometimes! A necessary leap of imagination is involved in coming to know even those closest to us. The full recognition of other human beings requires us to awaken to a sympathetic and imaginative discernment of their life (most of it inevitably invisible) - understanding their language, reading their faces, and, if possible, feeling what transpires in their hearts, the very content of what is normally understood by empathy or compassion. A precise and ethical imagination is required to see the full humanity of another. Consider what Rabindranath has to say on the matter:

All those whom we know in the world we know like a dotted line; that is, there are gaps in the middle which we need to fill in as best we can. Even those we feel we know best have to be made complete by our own imaginative powers...

In light of passages that have been quoted earlier, it can’t be said, however, that for Rabindranath the imagined other is the real other, any more than the imagined self is the real self. The distinction between the real and the imagined is itself a real, not an imaginary one. It is thus all-important and sets Tagore apart from many contemporary strands of thought as per which all is imaginary. Perhaps a true test of one’s knowledge of the other is when one knows what is real – and what is imagined – for the other person. If it broadly concurs with that person’s own estimate of what is real and what is imagined, it could be said that one ‘knows’ the person. There is, of course, another dimension to Rabindranath Tagore’s understanding of these matters. His faith in the ultimate unity of existence suggests that he might be more comfortable viewing ‘the other’ as ‘another’.

Self-knowledge and the natural world

This brings us to the question of the self. Nature is not merely a lively muse for Rabindranath’s poetic imagination. It takes him well beyond the limits of his customary self, into the fathomless universe of the stranger within. He realises frequently that it takes the impressive surrounding presence of nature for a man to recognise himself:

This enormous earth changes its seasons every couple of months - then how do small men like us keep up an equitable display of politeness all twelve? The huge problem for man is that he goes against nature when he has to function according to the laws of society in exactly the same way all three hundred and sixty-five days of the year - actually actually he has to shyly and fearfully hide the eternally new, eternally mysterious core that is within him and make himself appear exactly like a mechanical device driven by the daily operations of routine. That’s why men go wrong from time to time; become rebellious; that’s why men want to take shelter in literature in order to truly understand themselves; that’s why the workplace is a prison and the imagination a place of freedom (Emphasis added).

Liberated from his social limits, Rabindranath experiences – as so often before! – something much more than himself, the vastness – virtual limitlessness – of consciousness. Thus, the surrounding presence of nature is essential, according to Rabindranath, for us, as human beings, to ‘know’, to realise the limits of one’s knowledge, to experience the strangeness of everything, and wonder at ourselves. Only thus is a life of true significance possible. It is nature which inspires the ‘song, art, beauty’ in the absence of which ‘the soul is denied nourishment and remains neglected and starved’ and it becomes really difficult to bear our sorrows”. We are normally unconscious of this great need, and often realise it only once it is attended to:

People cannot even begin to believe that things like these are absolutely essential for anybody. I too slowly begin to forget that almost none of the roots that feed myself are getting any nutrition. In the end, when suddenly one day some little source of nourishment becomes available, and I feel the intensity of my eager heart, I remember that all these days I was starving, and that this is an essential requirement for my temperament to continue to live (Emphasis added). \(^{42}\)

The space of solitude in the presence of nature is a necessary condiment in the food for Rabindranath’s soul. In a moment of frustration with unwanted company he writes:

As such by nature I’m uncivilised…Unless there’s a lot of empty space all around, I cannot completely unpack my mind, spread out my hands and feet, and settle down… \(^{43}\)

Tagore was as fond of illuminating analogies as Wittgenstein (especially in his later writings), frequently coming up with them to communicate an insight. A meditation on the Padma in spate makes him realise something profoundly simple about the nature of human consciousness. It is his way, one might say, of grasping the nature of what philosophers call ‘the mind-body problem’. This is what he writes:

In the movement of humans, animals or plants, there is some movement and some rest, movement in some parts and rest in others. But the river moves from top to bottom—that’s why it’s possible to compare it to the movement of our minds, our consciousness. Our bodies move partially—the legs move the body—but our minds habitually move in their entirety. \(^{44}\)

The implication is that while bodies are divisible, minds are not, a conclusion that chimes—surprisingly—with Descartes’ realisation in *Meditations* \(^{45}\) As the great physicist Erwin Schrödinger too noted astutely in his Oxford lectures in 1944, the number of minds in the Universe is just one. \(^{46}\)

**The fatally crippled self**

In his insistence that the surrounding presence of the natural world is essential to a fully conscious human life, Rabindranath Tagore is perhaps unique among modern thinkers. This affirmation of his found expression not merely in thousands of pages of his writings and his musical compositions. They find their clearest physical expression in the rural location and ambience of Santiniketan, the educational institution founded by the poet. Without daily

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46 Erwin Schrödinger, *What is Life? Mind and Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944), Chapter VII.
instruction from nature, human education is crippled: this is the long-enduring message of Santiniketan, despite the incursions of the urban mind in its daily working. Today, all humanity is being invited to live a life that only the ‘privileged’ have been living hitherto, an antiseptic life in highly processed man-made environments, regulated by the global hardware and software of modernity. Is the divorce from nature sustainable? A time comes when a civilisation becomes an everyday insult to nature. It flirts casually with the elements themselves. When this time arrives, it is time to reopen Kalidasa and old, discarded volumes of epic poetry, for the elements themselves act in vengeful concert against such humiliation hurled by one of ‘nature’s grandchildren’. For global technological modernity that time has been here for a discernible long while, Rabindranath being one of the first harbingers of the catastrophe that awaits it. He is among the first to recognise that the consciousness of ecology – on which rests the future of the species – depends on the ecology of consciousness. To bring Tagore’s pantheistic philosophy of immanence into conversation with the imperilled twenty-first century, and especially with its pressing ecological concerns, has become very urgent.

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