

Does nature play?

Rebuilding our relationship with the Earth

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Rosy starling flock beginning murmuration, Bhigwan, Maharashtra (India) © Ashish Kothari

I watch, mesmerized. Thousands of starlings wheel and cruise and dive and ascend in one formation, suddenly split into two and then merge back. After many rounds of this, their dense mass looking like rapidly forming and dissipating clouds, they suddenly, noisily, dive into a grove of trees. It is now dusk, and they are settling in to roost for the night.

Several times I have watched the incredible [murmuration of starlings](#). As if the evening performance is not enough, they will repeat it in the morning after being aroused by dawn's faint light, before going about whatever business they have through the day. Not only do we not know how they do it – how do they not crash into each other, is one of them taking a lead and somehow sending split-second signals to several thousand others to turn right, up, down, left, u-turn, or is there some other completely distributed collective sense they use? But even more intriguing, why do they do it? To tire themselves out before going to roost, to get one of those sweet sleeps that only a good hard day's work can get you? But then why in the morning? Is it to signal that they are all together, come day or night? If

its defence against predators (as some say), why make so many manoeuvres for such an extended period? Or is it simply having fun; like a human child maximizing his or her play time (possibly driving its parents nuts, and maybe even enjoying *that*)?

Do birds play? Do other species, animals and plants, do things simply for fun? Do other elements of nature, like rivers, have their own agency, in ways we can hardly comprehend?

In an interaction with schoolkids in the highlands of Ladakh, in India's trans-Himalayan landscape adjoining Tibet, my colleague Shrishtee Bajpai asked them 'what do you think are the rights of rivers?'. We were sitting on the banks of the Indus river, and she was taking a session on rights of rivers. This was part of a workshop organized by the Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (LAMO) with the Chumathang Government High School.

"It has the right to not be polluted", said one student; "the right to have fish", said another. And then came a response that left Shrishtee and I stunned: "it has the right to sing". And another child piped up: "it has the right to play... it plays with the stones, with its banks, with the fish..."

Who but children, not yet weighed down by the conventions of mainstream education, not yet taught to think only 'rationally' and 'scientifically', and still able to play freely amidst the hills and fields of her homeland, could come up with such observations?

The realization that animals have, or should have, rights just as we humans do, struck me sometime in high school. But it has taken many more years - decades - for me to understand what this really means, what is entailed in all of nature (including ourselves) having rights, or rather, what it means to understand that nature has its own agency. And that in the process of human-centred 'development', and our hubris-filled attempts at ruling the earth, we attempt to deny this agency... until nature hits back as it is increasingly doing now.

In the 1990s, having spent a considerable amount of time with the movement (the Narmada Bachao Andolan) to save central India's river Narmada from being dammed, I got the opportunity to do a training workshop for the engineers and officials of the dam project while teaching at the Indian Institute of Public Administration. I gave a presentation on the environmental impacts of the project, and slipped in something about whether the Narmada river should also have the right to flow free. The look of hostile incredulity on the faces of most of my audience hit me with a force; while I'd anticipated skepticism, I did not expect hostility. Fortunately, the notion of a river having rights was so alien to engineers steeped in the mechanistic tradition of looking at nature as a resource to exploit, most were too dumbstruck to react! But the tea break that followed was very interesting; a couple of the participants came up and said I was indulging in fantasy, but one, hanging around a bit at the back, said that perhaps I had a point. After all, he said, did not Hindus consider the Narmada as a mother? As did, I told them, Adivasis (India's Indigenous people) living along the river.

Who is to say that a river cascading, bubbling and frothing, jumping over and splitting around boulders, disappearing underground, tumbling down a cliff, breaching its banks, and over generations, changing course, is not playing? What gives us the hubris to think that this is simply a bunch of atoms responding to the forces of gravity and temperature and resistance? And are these two gazes, both human, mutually incompatible?

Anyone who has ever had a dog or cat companion, or seen squirrels endlessly chasing each other over the branches of a tree, will have little doubt that they are playing. Maybe there is a mechanistic way of explaining what they are doing, but then we may as well use the same explanation for a human child's play. Somehow, we have come to believe, or made to believe by currently dominant systems of knowing and understanding, that only humans are capable of play, of abstract thought, of living beyond the imperatives of feeding and reproducing. But the pathbreaking work of ethologists and scientists who are not afraid to break artificial barriers of cognition, with octopuses, dolphins, apes and monkeys, crows and other bird species, even (wait, why even?) insects, and forest ecosystems, is showing us that there is much hidden in the non-human natural world that we have simply never understood. And this includes even the possibility that other animals (who knows, perhaps plants too?) have self-consciousness, a sense of the 'me' which is another feature we think only humans have.

Clarification: by 'we' above, I mean those of us who are steeped in a certain 'western' system of knowledge and understanding. Many of the earth's peoples have for millennia actually recognized the agency and intelligence and emotions and playfulness of the non-human (or, as some would prefer to say, the 'more-than-human'). In 2019 I was fortunate to be with the Sapara Indigenous Nation in the Ecuadorian Amazon for 5 days, and got a glimpse of how they relate to all of nature around them. As one of its leaders, [Manari Ushugua](#) said, every element of it has a spirit, whether it's 'living' like plants and animals, or 'non-living' like stones and the river (note the inverted commas around those words, this is not a binary the Sapara would use). Even time has a spirit. Life has to be lived in a respectful relationship with these spirits; they are spoken to and speak back, including in dreams that are crucial to understanding the cosmos, and the interpretation of which is used in practicing daily life.

A couple of years before that I had occasion to visit the Niyamgiri hills of Odisha in eastern India, to meet with the Dongria Kondh Adivasis who had fought (successfully) against a proposed mining project by the UK-based multinational corporation Vedanta. I and my colleagues in Kalpavriksh (the NGO I've been working with for over four decades) wanted to understand not so much their struggle itself, but the [worldviews underlying it](#). Movement leaders Dodhi Pusika and Lado Sikaka explained to us that the territory they inhabited did not belong to them, it belonged to Niyamraja ('king of rules'), who presided over the hills and valleys and whose permission was needed for any activity. When the government came seeking their opinion on the mining proposal, they told it to go ask Niyamraja.

Such an interaction would have been enormously confusing for government

officials; most likely they would have dismissed the Dongria Kondh assertion as illiterate, primitive nonsense. Fortunately, the Indian Supreme Court recognized the cultural rights of the community, and directed the government to seek consent from all the gram sabhas (village assemblies) of the Dongria Kondh. Unanimously, the sabhas rejected the mining proposal. Were they directed to do so by Niyamraja, or were they acting on their own human agency? Or both? Who is to say?

And so, as an extension of this understanding that nature (including humans) has agency, we must ask ourselves: does nature play? Do plants and non-human animals play, do they do things for the sheer enjoyment of it, are they having fun that has nothing to do with the imperatives of breeding and feeding?

In one of his [typically brilliant essays](#), the anthropologist-activist David Graeber (who tragically passed away at too young an age), says:

... those who do look into the matter are invariably forced to the conclusion that play does exist across the animal universe. And exists not just among such notoriously frivolous creatures as monkeys, dolphins, or puppies, but among such unlikely species as frogs, minnows, salamanders, fiddler crabs, and yes, even ants—which not only engage in frivolous activities as individuals, but also have been observed since the nineteenth century to arrange mock-wars, apparently just for the fun of it. Why do animals play? Well, why shouldn't they? The real question is: Why does the existence of action carried out for the sheer pleasure of acting, the exertion of powers for the sheer pleasure of exerting them, strike us as mysterious?

Play can, as Graeber notes, also be cruel, like a cat playing with a mouse before killing and devouring it. Or a human kid plucking a wing off a butterfly before letting it flutter off, inevitably to die prematurely. I am not pointing here to the morality and ethics of the action, but simply saying: what makes us think the more-than-human cannot play?

But if we do accept this, then ethics does come into play. If we recognize that it is not only humans that have emotions, self-perception, fun, and agency, then we can no longer find it acceptable to treat other species or the rest of nature as commodities, or resources meant only for our exploitation. This does not mean stopping to use nature – after all, various species in nature are using others for all kinds of purposes. But it does mean that we act *sapient*, not only in its meaning as 'intelligent' but more importantly in its meaning as 'wise'.

I suppose it would be difficult for anyone to argue that a Snow leopard, while taking down an ibex to eat, is acting compassionately and ethically. I have no idea if it can indeed feel ethically inclined towards its prey, or at all. But if we as humans claim to have ethics on our side, then why not use them in our relations with the rest of nature (and of course, with each other!)? If we do see beauty in the murmuration of starlings and the incredible mating dance of Birds of paradise, or 'even' in a bug

crossing our table, can this combine with a sense of what is right and wrong, into an [aesth-ethics blending ecology, justice and art](#)? Will this help heal the deep rift that the modern, industrial 'we' have created between us and the rest of nature?

As an important aside, I want to stress that I am not here advocating any particular food or diet, and most certainly any imposition of homogenous ideologies of any kind on the great diversity of ways of human living and being. As I recall telling the Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organisations (FIAPO) [some years back](#), many ecosystem-dwelling communities who hunt for their food, are far more respectful of the Earth, and sustainable in their living, than most urban vegans or vegetarians (like myself) whose lifestyles lead to trampling nature across the globe. It is in industrial forms of meat production and consumption (or for that matter, in the mass monocultures of crops), that we lose all sense of an aesth-ethics of living with the Earth. Certainly, these (and the entire capitalist-statist model of industrialisation and 'development' they are a manifestation of) have to be fundamentally transformed, if we want to have any chance of rescuing ourselves and the rest of nature from the multiple catastrophes of biodiversity loss, toxification, and climate change.

But that is fodder for a very different essay, some other time. Right now, if I was still in Ladakh, I'd have sought out that kid to sit on the banks of the Indus with her and learn how she hears the river sing. But I'm back in Pune, a city that has so ill-treated its rivers that they are probably just wailing along their course. So instead, I will go find one of my favourite neighbourhood street dogs to play with ... to experience with her some pure, unadulterated joy.

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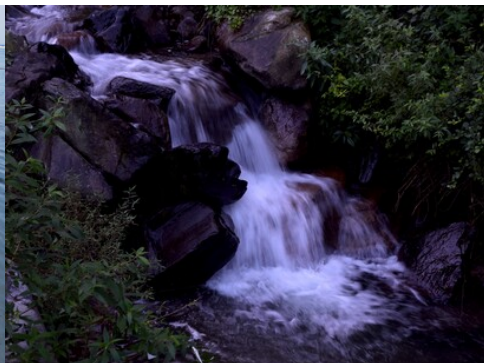
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Founder-member of Indian environmental group Kalpavriksh, Ashish taught at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, coordinated India's Biodiversity Strategy & Action Plan process, was on Greenpeace International & India Boards, and helps coordinate Vikalp Sangam and Global Tapestry of Alternatives.

[Author profile](#)



1. The author playing hanky-panky with Snowy the puppy - we know dogs play, so why not the rest of nature? © Shrishtee Bajpai
2. Children in the sea, Lakshadweep Islands (India) - we readily accept that they are playing, so why not with other animals?
3. Is this cascading stream in Devalsari (Uttarakhand, India) reaching a crescendo of fun and play? © Ashish Kothari
4. Whitespotted fantail, Pune ... constantly fanning its tail in an extravagant display - all about breeding, or also play © Ashish Kothari
5. Swirling waters - are they playing, or simply following some human-determined laws of physics? © Ashish Kothari
6. Yellow-throated martens in Devalsari (Uttarakhand, India) © Ashish Kothari

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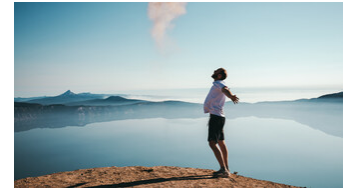
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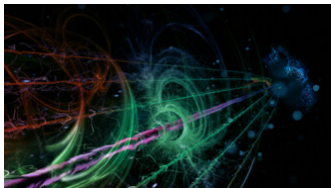
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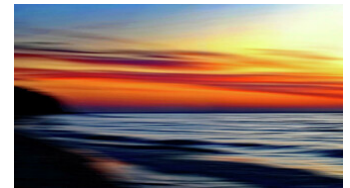
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