

Friluftsliv as answering nature's open address Ph. D. Bjørn Tordsson, Telemark University College

The experience of (free) nature plays an important role in modern leisure life, especially in the Scandinavian countries. Among them, Norway is probably the one where *friluftsliv* has the strongest standing in terms of culture and daily life style. Norway has a limited and widely spread population and easy access to a rich and varied nature.

However, the strong position of *friluftsliv* in Norway also has historical and ideological reasons. In sources like the yearbook from the Norwegian Tourist Association (DNT), published since 1868, the development of *friluftsliv* can be studied from first hand sources. In the beginning of the century, *friluftsliv* was related to the national project to get a general view of the country and discover its qualities in nature and culture. Between the wars, *friluftsliv* was also related to social integration and upraising of the labour classes by liberating them from oppression in industrialism and poor neighbourhoods. After World War II, extended welfare and leisure time made *friluftsliv* a sphere of life without the regulations and restrictions that characterize modern life. Around 1970-1980, *friluftsliv* was associated with a vital counter-culture, inspired by the ideas of the deep ecological movement.

These changing ideologies indicate that *friluftsliv* is not a natural phenomenon, but made of a socio-culturally constructed material. Challenging the naturalistic ideology that man recalls his own unchanged natural essence when experiencing natural environment, cultural analysists have pointed out that "nature" is a cultural key concept given different ideological meanings in different periods. Above all, "nature" stands in a dichotomical relation to "culture", and thereby reveals, in a negative form, some aspects of what "culture" and "modern life" stand for.

However, if used to illuminate the experience of nature by the individual, such perspectives tend to overemphasize the aspect of *reproducing* culturally transferred patterns of interpretation and categorization. It conceals that meeting with nature also means a personally *active creation of meaning* in interaction with the terms given by nature.

We can read the diaries, literary essays and other written sources about *friluftsliv* not only as how a *discourse* is developed, but also as "phenomenological" descriptions. What if we try to understand the texts not as reflections from a social construction of reality, but as witnesses from an experienced *Lebenswelt* with its distinctive character? Understood like this, some surprisingly persistent themes – in spite of differences and changing attitudes – can be found:

One is the descriptions of experiences of living "as a whole person": that meeting with nature with simple means gives opportunity to act in a sensually, physically, emotionally and intellectually integrated way.

One can see how this theme gradually evolved in interplay with the development of modernity. In early tourism, there was no real difference between traveling in the wilderness and in the settled country. The aim was not the trip by itself as much as to reach specific beautiful places to *look at* and admire. The travel as such was mainly considered as distances of transportation or physically stressing hindrances towards the aimed destinations. But as modern means of communication was introduced, people found that different ways of traveling also meant different ways to experience the

landscape. Now a new form of aesthetics developed, esteeming a physically and sensuously active relation to the landscape, rather than a passive receiving and accepting one.

The melody of the autumn mountain is simple but richly orchestrated. The pulse beat with another rhythm, the lungs drink the clearness of the air, the eyes get sharper and the colors clearer. The body I inhabit feels different and I surprise myself when trying to stretch me out in it, making it my own. I throw my backpack on a dry spot, grasp a handful of sunwarm crowberries and experience how life tastes unsugared.

Such descriptions can often lead the thought to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the *body* as, at the same time, the fundament of the self and as something relational: *being-to-the-world*. More than so – the descriptions from friluftsliv calls for an interpretation of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty in an “ecological” direction. Statements like “being a part of the nature”, to “recognize oneself in the landscape”, or “being unified with the essence of the mountains” can be understood not only as an echo from the ideas of romanticism. They can also indicate that the dichotomy between “subject” and “object” really can be revoked, when using senses and capacities integrated in interplay with nature.

One important aspect here is the experience of *stillness* in nature. The discourse on friluftsliv describes stillness not only as absence of noise or freedom from sensuous pressure, or relieving from a world that constantly and distractively calls upon our attention. One claims that stillness is, primarily, a *feature of nature*, which, secondly, brings forth a state of mind, when you open up your senses and allow yourself to dwell in your being. Although related to such concepts as contemplation, meditation and reflection, the experience of stillness is not something *introspective*, but related to a wide open awareness and susceptibility to the impressions from nature:

To have humility is to experience reality, not in relation to ourselves, but in its sacred independence. It is to see, judge, and act from the point of rest in ourselves. /.../ In the point of rest at the center of your being, we encounter a world where all things are at rest in the same way. Then a tree becomes a mystery, a cloud a revelation, each man a cosmos of whose riches we can only catch in glimpses. (Dag Hammarskjöld: Markings)

Another theme is that meeting with nature gives the opportunity to develop such virtues as self-reliance, autonomy, genuineness and responsibility for one's own deeds. Social constructivists have seen this as mirroring the individualistic ethos in modern competitive society, where you have to confront yourself with challenges to improve your offensive traits of character. But the theme can also be understood in a totally different way.

According to Sartre, *authentic existence* has to do with being aware of the features in the situation, choosing *project* and act out from a true understanding of one's possibilities and limitations, thus taking the full responsibility for one's own deeds. The project is thereby not only something that we *have*, but also something that we, in a sense, *are*. Choosing project and acting in a world that gives resistance, gives us opportunity to work with our *basic project*: the choice between being as we used to be, or to use the fundamental freedom to change.

Characteristic for modern life is to be enveloped by demands, given as unclear expectations from the surroundings rather than intentional projects chosen by ourselves. They have an anomic nature, as we seldom have any absolute criterias as to whether we successfully fulfill these demands or not, and as we often are judged with yardsticks we don't approve.

This calls for searching spheres in life where one can isolate and give a metaphorical form to the *demand of being surrounded by demands*. By realization of simple projects – to find the way, light the fire, walk the path, paddle the stream etc. – one will get a direct response to actions, that can confirm living *authentically*. When you simplify life towards the elementary, you can experience the meaningfulness in plain actions because they directly reflect your own deeds, and at the same time reveal the rich qualities in the world you act in.

To find the way to the hut in the darkness, to light the fire although the frost has galvanized the wood, to get wet socks to dry at the sunny side of the tent roof, to eat when you are hungry and sleep when you are tired, looking forward to wake up in the morning at the place at which you have chosen to put up your tent...

According to Sartre, the situations, with its limitations and possibilities, make freedom possible: he is talking of freedom *in* the situations, not freedom *from* them. And as we always are *situated*, the freedom is always possible, at least when it comes to how we understand our destiny. Following Kierkegaard here, Sartre means that freedom is often experienced as *anguish*, based on the insight that the values that guide our choices are values just because we choose them. As we tend to escape from anguish, we also run away from freedom and transform it into faith.

Even if this doctrine claims to have absolute validity, the experience of freedom can appear with very different faces. In friluftsliv, this theme of freedom and responsibility for our own deeds is typically related to something more like a *meaningful play*, unveiling the qualities in the world, rather than enduring anguish and experiencing contingency. By acting in the world, we “create” what is already created. By acting we discover ourselves by letting the features of the world appear: the glide and grip of the snow while skiing, the grips and stands of the rock when climbing, the rhythms and powers of the streams and rapids when paddling, the fantastic features of the wind and waves by sailing a boat...

The main question that arises here is whether *nature* has any specific qualities as *Lebenswelt* compared with other types of environment. The rich discourse of friluftsliv persistently asserts a fundamental contrast between everyday life in modern society and the life conditions in nature. Nature is civilization *as absent*. By meeting with nature, one can gain counter-experiences of what being in the world means. It is claimed that this even gives a foundation for an existential reorientation of uttermost value for the individual. But can such wide pretensions be underpinned theoretically, for example in the concepts of phenomenology?

Sartre is known to be a typical urbanist, easy to imagine being sitting in a smoky café in Paris (perhaps waiting for a Pierre that never arrives). We have no reason to believe that he looked upon nature as a manifestation of an inherent fundamental meaning *in* life or *with* life. But it is striking that he often uses examples that remind of friluftsliv when he illustrates his doctrine of freedom and authentic existence. He takes us out skiing with the “Norwegian or French method”, we stand under a rock deciding whether to climb or not, we walk in the mountain with heavy loads until we meet the limits of our bodily capacity. The *facticities* that we experience should be understood as the terms of freedom, which makes us able to act in accordance with our best ability.

When Sartre later in his authorship enters deeply into the social reality in the modern urban world, the tone and temper is totally different. Here the terms bears the stamp of the *dependency* upon a socio-material reality, where *facticity* is experienced as contingency and seriality, a “sticky” and “practical-inert field of action”, that results in results in oppression and reproduction of social subordination.

Perhaps the characteristics of nature, as a sphere of existence, really can be – as the discourse persistently tells us – understood in contrast to the modern urban world? Nature is a *material* field, but not a *sociomaterial*. It is not formed to accomplish human interests and thus not supplied with inherent instructions for behavior. Nature gives open possibilities to choose projects, and to change between them. It is a field of action that can be *structured by us*, in interplay with something that can confirm or dismiss our understanding. Thus, nature gives an *open address*, and a space for interpretation. Nature can indeed mean a lot *to us*, but it hardly means anything *about us*. Like the Rorschach Test, is open for different aspects of meaning, corresponding with the inner world of the individual.

Nature doesn't tell us how it should be interpreted, but the chosen project does. If we choose to climb, the climbing does something with the *rock*: makes its features relevant to climbing apparent, and does something with *us*: calls upon, and develops, certain capacities.

Summing up, let me draw some simple conclusions from these perspectives. First of all, the phenomenological approach can give a pertinent basis for questioning both the experience of nature and the friluftsliv-tradition. We neither have to decay to naïve empiricism nor draw upon biologicistic theories about the natural man as he appears “purified” from culture, nor even look upon the experience of nature or the phenomenon of friluftsliv entirely as reflecting the social construction of reality. Instead we can look for the intrinsic meaning of different projects in nature: what does climbing, sailing or hiking etc. *do* with us.

That doesn't mean that a phenomenological understanding exclude the insight that we comprehend nature in accordance with concepts and categories given by the culture we belong to. We strive to understand something *as* something; we relate experiences to the language we have access to. This should not be understood as a *deformation* of “authentic” prereflexive experiences, but as possibilities to recognize and verify aspects of them. However, we all have experiences that goes beyond what normal language can express. As meeting with nature calls upon a *sensuous acting relation* to the world, rather than an intellectual or conceptual one, we can develop other sides of the human nature than those modern everyday life calls upon.

From a phenomenological basis, one can build bridges to other theoretical traditions as, for example, flow-theory, tacit knowledge, deep ecology and ecopsychology. At my institute, this approach has showed to be fruitful and has been used to enlighten as different tasks as safety in climbing, understanding marked footpaths as prestructured experience, differences in how different ways of traveling result in different conceptions of nature, experience of stillness in nature, how to learn practical skills in climbing, development of professionalism in guiding and analysis of educational processes. From the opposite perspective, the rich and varied friluftsliv tradition can give guidance on what to look for, when it comes to exploring more generally the experience of nature from a phenomenological perspective.