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Unstable Cliffs

'Unstable cliffs', says the sign along the North Norfolk coast path – reassuringly. 'Reassuringly'? Indeed so, because it 'tells it as it is'. Reassuring, when one compares it to the equivalent signage along the Pembrokeshire coast path in West Wales. This says, in all seriousness, 'cliffs can kill', and is accompanied by a suitably graphic illustration of a human figure falling headlong accompanied by an assortment of smaller and larger pieces of rock.

The sentiment – or I should say sentimentality – behind the notion that our cliffs are developing homicidal tendencies put me in mind of an outbreak of 'weak bridge syndrome' that occurred in our locality some years back. Suddenly, and without warning, 'weak bridge' signs sprang up like mushrooms adjacent to bridges that had hitherto seemed perfectly serviceable and in good health, or in some cases adjacent to bridges that had long since ceased to carry traffic of any more significance or weight than the odd passing cow. It soon transpired, of course, that the outbreak in question – brought on, no doubt, by an injection of legal advice – was an outbreak of nervousness on the part of the local council, anxious to cover its back against the possibility of lawsuits arising from any unfortunate encounters with the aforesaid bridges. Readers will be aware of some of the more notorious examples of the phenomenon that I am calling sentimentality, such as the ascription of increased levels of pollution in major cities to 'the warmer weather'. One thing they all have in common is the evading of responsibility. If we fall headlong from the cliff path, then somehow the cliffs are to blame, rather than our own stupidity. If the bridge gives way, then this is because it was weaker than it should have been, rather than because our load was too heavy for it. If pollution afflicts our cities, we blame the sun rather than the internal combustion engine.

I call this sentimentality because it involves construing the world as in some way better, or more congenial, than we have reason to believe it to be – a cognitive stance that in turn generates inappropriate attitudes and emotional responses. Essentially it is a failure to face facts. It bears a passing resemblance to idealism – the determination to make the world better than we have reason to believe it to be, and optimism – the (self-aware) determination to expect things to be better than we have reason to believe they will be. But unlike idealism and optimism, which both have positive aspects, sentimentality is a vice. And when given free rein over environmental questions it is even a dangerous vice. Forget standard depictions of sentimentality, such as the overly dotting attitude to small animals, and think instead of governmental and institutional responses to some of the major environmental problems of our time. If these responses truly reflected a determination to avoid sentimentality, my guess is that they would much better reflect the policies that environmentalists are calling for. And if 'technological optimism' (a decidedly sentimental description, come to think of it) were to be re-named more appropriately 'technological sentimental-

ity', we might be more wary of it. In other words, doing the right thing by the environment might be more a matter of starting from the practice of a particular virtue – the avoiding of sentimentality – than a matter of signing up to some environmentalist principle.

What I find congenial about this thought – but not I hope more congenial than I have reason to find it – is that it helps to resolve the vexed question of where an environmental philosopher's priorities should lie. Is she or he a philosopher first, and an environmentalist second, or vice-versa? Well, a philosopher – a lover of wisdom and truth – must surely therefore be a hater, and avoider, of sentimentality. And if the avoidance of sentimentality, in turn, directs one into the path(s) of environmentalism, the vexed question receives a neat solution. An environmental philosopher is one who arrives at their environmentalism through their philosophy. I should not mind if there were a touch of idealism or even optimism about this thought. But if there is even a whiff of sentimentality about it – then perish the thought!

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