



On being unbalanced

Description

Balance is one of the master metaphors of health, life and of nature (nicely sidestepped in [Mark Zuckerberg's recent plan](#) to engineer a disease free future). The seminal book by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, identifies balance as a ubiquitous concept easily traced back to the human body. After all, from an early age, the human animal becomes aware of the need to stand and to balance on just two spindly limbs.

There's a symmetry to the body that engenders the idea of a left and a right in balance. Such symmetry translates to the way we reason and speak weighing up the options, deciding on balance to eat a bowl of chips rather than order the salad, and other more serious ethical challenges. The famous icon of justice is a female figure, blindfolded and holding up a *pair* of weighing scales for comparing the weights of two commodities.

Traditionally, many scholars thought of health and wellbeing as matters of balance, e.g. the balance of the bodily humors. In his book *Attunement*, and in which he advocates for the theme of balance, Alberto Perez-Gomez says of ancient classical architecture and its successors, "The role of architecture, particularly the city's orientation and its buildings' properly proportioned configuration, was to mediate between man and nature, the living cosmos, and thereby contribute fundamentally to the maintaining of such balance, allowing humans to live harmonious lives" (2-3). It seems that for Perez-Gomez this balance is lost to our modern, highly engineered and digitalised age.

Not only the body, but nature and our relationship with it becomes the model of a balanced existence, much desired, and highly valued. Balance, harmony, and equilibrium come across as necessities and virtues in the worlds of architecture, environment, physical and psychological health, and nature.



Unbalance

It is perhaps strange therefore that *balance* is after all not the keenest metaphor scholars deploy when thinking about nature. Ecosystems are often characterised by wide fluctuations in populations across species as each competes for dominance. Such is the Darwinian struggle for survival. Then there are catastrophes, even independent of human intervention, where whole populations are wiped out by fires, floods, eruptions, climatic change, and competition. That's nature raw in tooth and claw (Hobbes).

For critical theorist Herbert Marcuse there's at least one classical narrative that affirms: "The world of nature is a world of oppression, cruelty and pain, as is the human world; like the latter, it awaits its liberation" (166).

The *balance* narrative is a highly selective view of natural systems, accurately equated to a condition of stasis, stability, or a steady movement towards "improvement," such as a recovery of indigenous species, the retreat of invasive organisms, a restoration of biodiversity, or some condition of apparent cooperation between human habitation and that of other kinds. For the more naive it points to the eradication of parasites, pests and diseases.

The balance narrative applied to architecture paints a utopian picture of an impossibly balanced universe where "the wolf will dwell with the lamb" (Isaiah 11:6), the temple is at the centre of the town, there are just 360 days to a year, and the Earth's axis is perpendicular to its path of transit in a circle around the sun, accompanied by a lunar orbit in perfect synchrony.

The rhetoric of balance points to a static universe, after all not entirely attractive to the human organism in the natural world. Organic life by most accounts is a product of eccentricity, deviation, and the discrepancies that arise when things don't align and in their unbalance deliver tides, seasons, regions, and margins, enabling change, growth, innovation and organic diversity.

Resilience

In an influential article on ecological systems, Crawford Holling emphasises the metaphor of *resilience*. Contrary to the idea of stability, there are highly unstable ecological systems that demonstrate an enormous resilience (15), where instability, in the sense of large fluctuations, may introduce a resilience and a capacity to persist (15). Such observations reinforce Friedrich Nietzsche's famous aphorism, *From the military school of life*. What does not kill me makes me stronger (281).

Irrespective of benefits to psychological or physical health, such tendencies towards resilience accord with the instinct among many of us to seek out diversity in our experience of places, social situations, people and life in general.

Some of us, for some of the time at least enjoy bucolic landscapes, well proportioned buildings, meaningful places, and profoundly artistic experiences all the more when set against a backdrop of the mundane, tedious, risky or downright ugly. The latter can in turn be transformed through such variety into the intriguing, [zany](#) and challenging, and a particular kind of sublime.

[Mark Zuckerberg's utopian plan](#) to engineer disease free lives by the end of the century has none of the rhetoric of resilience. When a population or species hits the goal of supposed aseptic stasis then it loses out on the benefits of resilience that come from variation, adaptation and naturally acquired resistance. Without that we as a species are prone to even greater catastrophe, but by then the machines will have taken over. See [the singularity paradox](#).



Bibliography

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Notes

- Wrestling with misalignment, deviation and discrepancy for me constitutes the character of *attunement* as I explored in *The Tuning of Place*.
- The first image is the Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich, London, from the Thames. The second is a rail bridge in Glasgow.
- Holling discusses how populations in an ecological system may fluctuate about some stable position, implying some kind of global balance. But according to his resilience model those attractor points may in turn drift, or shift suddenly and dramatically. So the boundaries to these fluctuations are important in modelling natural systems. The stability viewpoint suggests that in the harvesting of natural resources we seek to maintain nature's equilibrium and try not to disrupt its fluctuations. So we harvest nature's excess production. Contrary to this view: "A management approach based on resilience, on the other hand, would emphasize the need to keep options open, the need to view events in a regional rather than a local context, and the need to emphasize heterogeneity. Flowing from this would be not the presumption of sufficient knowledge, but the recognition of our ignorance; not the assumption that future events are expected, but that they will be unexpected. The resilience framework can accommodate this shift of perspective, for it does not require a precise capacity to predict the future, but only a qualitative capacity to devise systems that can absorb and accommodate future events in whatever unexpected form they may take" (21).
- Norris et al apply some of the ideas about resilience to how communities cope with disasters.
- See a [critical article](#) on Zuckerberg's plan in *The Independent*.

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. attunement
2. balance
3. harmony
4. health
5. place
6. proportion
7. resilience
8. tuning

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