



# Fly Fishing Back to Nature

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## Abstract

Recent research has shown that fly fishing tourism reduces symptoms of PTSD, Depression, and Stress. Fly fishing literature claims that this is due to a reduction in technological activity. However, fly fishing is a gear-centric activity. In this paper I use the radical phenomenology of Erazim Kohák and Gabriel Marcel's concept of techniques of degradation to argue that fly fishing enacts a disruption of broader cultural norms of abstraction. This disruption reveals a more visceral and intimate relationship between humanity and the non-human world, despite its gear-centric culture.

**Keywords:** Fly Fishing, Tourism, Phenomenology, Technology, Recreational Therapy, Erazim Kohák, Gabriel Marcel

You are standing hip-deep in an ice-cold fast moving rocky mountain stream. The water tugs at your legs and yet you aren't wet. The waders take care of that. If you were barefooted the algae on the rocks would prove slick as snot and yet you don't slip. Your super soft and sticky vibram soled boots take care of that. You aren't even blinded by the glare of the sun on the pool up ahead. The polarized sunglasses take care of that. You wave around a graphite composite stick anchored by an ultralightweight die-cast aluminum reel with clicking drag. You might even don the mesh truckers cap to finish the ensemble. All of this to present a piece of feather to an unsuspecting trout, which you are going to let go anyway. These are the experiential givens of the modern fly-fishing trip. I am an avid fly fisherman that, before marriage and children, used to get over 150 days a year on the water. I know these experiential details intimately.

I was not surprised then when I read recently that fly fishing tourism had been shown to have therapeutic effects on patients with PTSD, depression, and perceived stress. I have sought



the consoling presence of rivers many times. What did surprise me, however, was when I started to dig into the small but fascinating world of academic fly fishing literature and found a thriving discourse on the role of technology. The scholars who investigate fly fishing generally agree that it facilitates a more authentic relationship to nature. Tom Mordue argues however, that this relationship to nature is rooted in the practice of “eschew[ing] the overuse of technology as compromising [fly fishing’s] integrity.” Indeed Mordue’s assertion parallels my own work in this very journal in which I argued that by engaging in a radical phenomenology of practical bracketing, by setting aside one’s artifacts and technology, we become more open to the natural world. However, it is clear to me, that fly fishing is anything but a neo-luddite rejection of technology. In fact, fly fishing, in both media and practice is a gear-centered culture. One needs to only take a cursory glance through any fly fishing magazine to see that connection with nature, and the gear that promises to make it possible, cannot be divorced. The latent assumption is that if you have the right stuff you will be able to go just a little bit farther, connect a little more authentically, be a little more wild. In this article I argue that it is not in the eschewal of technology that fly fishermen find connection with nature but rather in the bracketing of broader social norms of abstraction. I use Gabriel Marcel’s concept of techniques of degradation and Erazim Kohák’s radical phenomenology to show that by enacting even partially alternative practices of engagement the fly fishing tourist opens herself to a deeper connection with the natural world.

## Fly Fishing Historically and Socially

Fly fishing in the West has its roots in 16th and 17th century England. The publication of Dame Juliana Berner’s *Treatise of Fishing with an Angle* (1496) and Izaak Walton’s *The Compleat Angler* (1653) marked the birth of recreational fishing and defined many of its core traits including the retreat to nature, fair chase, and rugged individualism. Over time, the use of a fly to chase salmonids over other “coarse” fishing methods developed a distinct social status and class association. By the 19th century fly fishing had become a gentleman’s sport like wing shooting and fox hunting to such an extent that the popular television show *Downton Abbey* depicts fly casting as an activity of civility that separated the newly monied middle class from the landed gentry. Indeed, even today, the right to fish for Atlantic Salmon in



Scotland belongs to the Crown. United States saw a similar division between fly and bait casting in the 19th century but with a distinctly frontiersman masculinity undivorceable from American nationalism. As Washabaugh and Washabaugh argue, “to travel into the wilderness was considered to be an almost patriotic act.” Yet, despite the ruggedness of the social imagination surrounding fly fishing, it remained a luxury and leisure for the wealthy. The 19th century saw the advent and proliferation of expensive wilderness fishing lodges which concentrated both fly fishing activity and culture around high class service providers. Mordue notes that this manifest a paradox in which, “in practice, but wholly in terms of social class distinctions fly fishing in the USA retained a sense of masculine individualism but was a means of conspicuous consumption where the angling tourist exercised power over local land and people.” As with most aspects of American culture, there was a democratization of fly fishing after the second world war with the growth of the middle class and the decreasing cost of manufactured goods. Yet, fly fishing retains an air of elitism and conspicuous consumption. Private ranches often charge thousands of dollars per person for all-inclusive fly fishing vacations on private waters. Trips to exotic tropical destinations, or to Kamchatka, Russia can run even more expensive. The startup costs for just the gear can run close to two thousand dollars.

Of course, phenomenologically speaking, these prices and experiences exist within a thick matrix of what sociologists call actor networks: “Fish; rivers; lakes; other fisheries; lodges; fishing equipment; maps; books; magazines; websites; audio visual equipment; transport systems; communication systems such as telephones, email, the media; buildings; airports [and I might add pit-toilet latrines ... all] the variety of places and spaces play their roles in fishing actor networks.” But, as Heidegger argued, we must accept that our artifacts, even our mental artifacts, are not objective. Our tools present a loaded sense of the world to us and they become “most dangerous when we consider them neutral.” A chainsaw can reduce a forest to timber in our perception as surely as a dam can reduce the Rhine to a standing power reserve. How then can a fly rod and waders facilitate a closer connection to nature rather than simply revealing nature as a standing reserve of fishing thrills?



## A Brief Phenomenology of Technology

Heidegger wrote what is arguably the central phenomenological treatment of technology: the essay *The Question Concerning Technology*. In it he interrogates the essence of technology and concludes that technology offers the world to us as standing reserve. Standing reserve, we might translate to mean natural resources. They are the useful bits of the natural world. The timber, minerals, power, etc. that are out there waiting for us to harness and control for our use. It is our technology, our artifacts that reveal those resources to us in experience.

Erazim

Kohák offers a parallel, but original contribution to the phenomenology of technology. He draws directly

from Husserl's identification

of the intentionality of perception. All artifacts, material or mental, are designed with an intentionality in mind. Kohák follows Husserl's identification of the intentionality of perception and the role of the consciousness in perceiving. For Husserl, to state that consciousness is intentional is to say that it is directed towards an object.

So that every time

I am conscious, I am conscious of something: my

desk, my fatigue, my fly-fishing vacation: "perceiving, that is, is not a passion, something that happens to a

subject, but something a subject does to and with the world." Thus, Kohák proceeds by reiterating Husserl's methodology of the epoché or bracketing:

Our first step does need to be a bracketing of the thesis

of the naturalistic standpoint which, over the last three centuries, has become so familiar as to appear 'natural.' We need to suspend, for the moment, the presumption of the ontological significance of our constructs, including our conception of nature as 'material,' and look to experience with a fresh eye, taking as our datum whatever presents itself in experience, as it presents itself and only insofar as it presents itself, using the totality of the given as the starting point.



His principal concern is the possibility of perceiving a moral content or instruction in the extra-human world, which he considers an impossibility under the commonsense attitude of science:

We have, in effect, mistaken the development of our conceptual technology for a progress of knowledge, step by step substituting our constructs for experienced reality as the object and the referent of our thought and discourse. Those constructs, however, were designed for a particular purpose, that of the manipulation of our physical environment, and the composite image of reality they present is, appropriately, one of a system of manipulanda. In a nature so conceived, from which the dimensions most crucial to lived experience, those of value and meaning, have been intentionally bracketed out as 'subjective,' there is no more room for a moral subject.

The more we permit the scientific posture to characterize the uncritical commonsense attitude of our basic experience, the more our perceptions will inevitably be characterized by objects lacking in moral content or instruction because our scientifically characterized intentionality posits a world without moral significance. In the same way, science necessarily posits an objective world outside, beyond, and inter-personally inaccessible to the subject. Science creates the perception of a person unable to connect in any meaningful way with the non-human world since the non-human world is understood as meaningless matter in motion.

These commonsense attitudes, however, are the target of the initial Husserlian phenomenological epoch?, in which the philosopher aims to bracket the intentional constructs of perception in the attempt to see clearly what is given in experience. By bracketing the commonsense attitude, the philosopher presumably would be available and receptive to the moral Evidenz of creation if there is any given in experience. However, according to Kohák, this original and initial epoch? is insufficient because our intentional concepts are no longer merely theoretical but are in fact manifested in our technology:

With the expansion of our technology, we have, in effect, translated our concepts into artifacts, radically restructuring not only our

conception of nature but the texture of our ordinary experience as well.

Artifacts, or techn?, as products of human effort necessarily embody the intentionalities of their designer; thus, our artifacts are themselves manifestations of our commonsense attitudes. We, according to Kohák, find ourselves in a situation, where even after we affect the initial phenomenological epoch?, we are “surrounded by artifacts which indeed can teach us nothing but what we have programmed into them.” Furthermore, finding ourselves—even in the midst of the epoch?—surrounded by objects of our own design, the objects of our everyday lived experience impose their inherent intentionalities upon our perception. This feedback loop undermines the efficacy of the initial phenomenological epoch?. “Our constructs,” Kohák argues, “are no longer merely conceptual. We have translated them into artifacts which effectively hide the sense of our lived experience from us.” If Kohák’s analysis is correct, then when we aim to consider the ethical significance of the more-than- human world, we are severely inhibited, even after effecting the epoch?. Our lives are saturated with artifacts that manifest the conceptual technologies we used to undermine the ethical significance of creation in the first place:

Figuratively, we are all in the position of the child who has never seen, never mind milked, a cow, and whose lived experience constantly provides an experiential confirmation for the assumption that milk comes from a supermarket cooler. In such a context, the attempt at a phenomenological bracketing, no matter how it theoretically sounds, will inevitably prove practically futile. The *Sachen selbst*, the very stuff, of our daily experience will reintroduce the very constructs we have bracketed.

In our contemporary context, Kohák argues, our technological apparati fundamentally insulate our perceptions from the givens of the natural world. Instead, our perceptions are saturated with objects that manifest the intentionalities of their design.

It is insufficient to engage in the initial bracketing of the intentional constructs of the commonsense attitude. In order to clarify one’s perceptions of the more-than-human world, Kohák argues, one must engage in a second epoch?—a bracketing of our artifacts: “The proposal for phenomenological bracketing does acquire a new, radical dimension, as *not only a conceptual*,



*but a practical*

*bracketing as well*, a bracketing of artifacts.” Thus, Kohák radicalizes Husserl’s proposed epoch? to be not simply a bracketing of conceptual constructs but also an embodied, practical, bracketing of our techn?.

Accordingly, the last time I wrote for EPIS I called for a wilderness practice that engaged in embodied, practical, bracketing of our artifacts to clarify our perception of the natural world. I worked under the premise that our artifacts hide from us the true nature of the non-human. You can understand then, how these studies showing fly fishing facilitating closer relationships with nature despite its profound techno-emphasis motivated me to clarify my approach. Gabriel Marcel’s concept of techniques of degradation helps to ease this seeming conflict between the gear-centric culture of fly fishing and its ability to establish more authentic connections with nature.

## **Gabriel Marcel and Techniques of Degradation**

Marcel defines technique as a “group of procedures, methodically elaborated, and consequently capable of being taught and reproduced, and when these procedures are put into operation they assure the achievement of some definite concrete purpose.” Marcel’s concern is not the technique itself, it is of course authentically human to apply one’s reason to effecting particular objectives. His concern is when a person becomes a “prisoner of his techniques” in a manner akin to one being a slave to one’s habits. Marcel argues that the technician becomes a prisoner of his techniques when he comes to understand the technique independent of its purpose or desired outcome: when it becomes an end in itself. Imagine, for instance, the engineer who values artificial intelligence rather than the problems to which AI may be applied. Or, we all know the university administrator who values the forms, procedures, and chain of command over the results of successful research and quality education.

Ultimately, in Marcel’s analysis, technique gains ultimate hold upon humanity when people begin to think of themselves on the model of their own techniques. Doctors who understand patients as biological machines or philosophers who think of the mind as a bio-computer: “It is also becoming more and more obvious that when man seeks to understand his condition



by using as his model the products of his own technical skill, he infinitely degrades himself.” Heidegger makes a similar observation when he argues the technology will necessarily reveal humanity itself as standing reserve. Marcel already saw these techniques of degradation becoming dominant when he was writing in the late 40’s and early 50’s. A society in which humans are understood according to our techniques is a society of what Marcel calls “submen” or “beings who tend more and more to be reduced to their own strict function in a mechanized society, though with a margin of leisure reserved for amusements from which the imagination will be more and more completely banished.” Marcel has in mind the government bureaucrat, reduced to his role as a cog in the administrative machine, a paper-pusher and form-filler despairing of opportunity and vitality in life yet placated by radio, cheap literature, and other mass produced forms of entertainment. This is an early vision of the contemporary office administrator’s life ruled by email, forms, and structure. A form of work so abstracted from any real purpose as to seem meaninglessly arbitrary. Yet, these workers are paid well enough to afford Netflix, HBO, and the internet that makes them possible.

Marcel argues that this degradation applies to public discussion as much as to individuals. In fact, the degradation of public discourse is an essential feature of the degradation of individuals in Marcel’s mind:

To dispose of your opponent, or to put him down for the count, it is enough in France-today, to stick an obnoxious label on him and then to fling in his face, as one might a bottle of acid, some gross accusation to which it is impossible for him to reply; your opponent being completely confounded by such tactics, it will be said that he admits your case and capitulates.

This degradation of discussion, rooted in and essential to the degradation of humans, results in a practice of circular passions and propaganda “the propaganda incites the passions, the passions in their turn justify the excesses of the propaganda.” Within the pantechism of mechanical society, people are further reduced from their functions as workers to their function as consumers of both propaganda, in the form of media, and mass produced objects:



Technical progress, considered from the consumers point of view, encourages a kind of laziness, it also fosters resentment and envy. These passions centre themselves on definite material objects, whose possession usually does not seem to be linked to any definite personal superiority [...] where a frigidair or radio-gramophone are in question, the very ideas of 'having' and 'possessing' acquire a sense which is at once provocative of bad feeling and spiritually hollow.

Marcel advanced this argument nearly 70 years ago when the most dangerous technology was the "satanic" radio. And, it is important to note that he insists the techniques of degradation are wielded by both capitalists and communists. This seems a prophetic analysis. In a world where the President of the United States could tell us our most patriotic duty was to go shopping; when the internet, cable news, and social media accelerate and distribute partisan passions and propaganda at unimaginable speeds and extent; where wars in the Middle East can increasingly be conducted from a computer console in Kansas have we humans not been enslaved to our techniques?

## **Fly Fishing Reconsidered**

What then of Fly Fishing? Both anecdotally and in the data it appears that fly fishing can function to facilitate deeper connections with nature and therapeutically reduce mental stress. And yet the fly fishing tourist is still reduced in marketing, media, and culture to a consumer of fly fishing gear and propaganda. The techniques of degradation work to reduce the fisherman to be ever envious and discontent with her lot in life, ever striving for one more fish, one more exotic locale, and one more fish-pic for Facebook or Instagram. The guides, the shops, and the manufacturers share in an old-boys club of elitist arrogance and condescension that further reduce the tourist to an inauthentic interloper, a rich city-slicker happy with a mediocre trout. The gadgets and gear insulate the angler from fully visceral contact with the non-human, non-technological world. All of this occurs and yet, despite itself, fly fishing promises something transformative.

I have known many gearheads in the fly fishing world who, as Marcel would say, let the technique become independent of its purpose—the impulse to buy the next best reel, the next best rod, the most excellent



waders. The pursuit of excellence in the gear become its own self-justifying practice. Fishing was no longer about the experience in the wild; it was about technical mastery. Yet, once back on the river, the gear recedes to the background of our awareness and the water and the unrevealed fish come to the fore.

Perhaps,  
to simply go fishing, to stand in a river and feel the pull of the current, to get cold feet, to sling flies requires a “technique” that elevates rather than degrades. While it is evident that the fly angler does not practically bracket gadgets or contemporary technology, she still does bracket the techniques of contemporary culture. No matter how much fly fishing is manipulated by the manufacturers, guides, magazine printers and retailers to reduce the angler to a consumer of gear for the promise of connection with nature, in the end the angler still has to step into the stream. To step into a stream is to step away from a desk, computer, and email. To step into the river is to step out of one’s role as consumer, bureaucrat, and standing reserve. To step into a river is to step into a role more visceral and primordial. It is impossible to fish in abstraction.

It is this visceral embodiment that fishing requires which distinguished it from other forms of nature tourism. Franklin argues that tourists are defined by the visual:

The pressures of tourism combined with management strategies to minimize environmental damage further renders anything other than the gaze as problematic: Picking wildflowers, making off-track forays, disturbing rocks or forest or fore-shore litter and so forth are discouraged, minimizing visitors’ experience of touch and taste.

Other aspects of nature tourism can be largely disembodied, viewing spectacles of wildlife and mountains through a camera lens, windshield, or interpretive center. Franklin argues that hunters and anglers cannot be identified as tourists because of the necessarily embodied nature of their activities. Kip Redick makes a similar distinction between the aesthetic tourist and the pilgrim. The tourist, he argues, “journeys to experience a preconceived landscape.” The pilgrim, alternatively, pursues an



“encounter in the countryside.” However, an activity like fly fishing transcends these distinctions.

Fly fishing can never be predominantly visual. The angler’s senses are overwhelmed by the tension and vibrations of the line, the sounds of water and rising fish. Similarly, the fly fisherman can never predetermine her aesthetic experience. While the angler, by definition, pursues fish, it is the fish that

reveals itself at the moment of the take. Fishing is always an encounter in which the fish is an active self-revealing participant. For the angler, every cast becomes an act of faith: a physical enactment of commitment to the presence of fish not yet seen. Even a tourist, temporarily present and merely financially invested, enacts behaviors more akin to encounter than to observation. These behaviors are both a bracketing of our society’s commonsense attitudes and a disruption of our techniques of degradation. On the river fishermen are no longer mere standing reserve to be exploited by corporate human resources departments. The fly fishing tourist, not matter how wealthy, will still get fish slime on her hands and bugs in her hair. She will still get cold. She will still cast, with hope, to spots holding no fish. The angler is going to deny the sedentary nature of visual entertainment. In the end, the angler, if she is actually going to fish, has to get wet. There is a necessary physicality to being on the water that simply cannot be reduced to a technique of degradation. This necessary physicality reveals a more primordial human existence in the world—one not dominated by our feats of engineering and technology. For ultimately, despite all the degrading efforts to package, promote, and profit from the fly fishing tourist, in the end you really can fly fish your way back to nature.

## Endnotes

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