



Sunlight on the Sea: Reflecting on Reflections

David E Cooper

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Myth and religion, poetry and prose, painting and music attest to the fascination of reflections of the sun on the surface of the sea. For D.H. Lawrence, Henri Matisse and many others, the experience of sunlight on the sea gives vigour and vitality to our lives. This short book is one philosopher's enquiry into the significance of this experience, an attempt to articulate the meaning of an experience that many people both need and cherish. The starting point is the undeniable beauty of glittering reflections on the sea, the most perfect of all beauties, according to Arthur Schopenhauer. Inspiration is then drawn from ancient traditions of thought - Chinese, Greek, Indian - that emphasised the unity of beauty, goodness and truth. The question addressed is what the beauty we find in sunlight on water shows about our understanding of the good life and of the way of things. In some chapters, a parallel question is asked, by way of counterpoint, about the significance of a contrasting kind of beauty - the shadowy and subdued beauty that has been especially appreciated in Japanese culture. In the glistening surface of a sunlit sea, the author argues, there is a metaphor for and an expression of aspects of the good life - happiness, spontaneity and intimacy with nature. In looking at this surface, we have a glimpse of how we would want our relationship to the world to be. But reflections of the sun in water are also a metaphor for or an epiphany of reality. This is the world as it is prior to being subjected to human conceptual schemes and purposes. It is the world as an integrated whole of experience - a quicksilver, soft-edged, ephemeral realm whose source is a mystery. In the swirling, ever-changing and ever-merging reflections on the surface of a sea whose depths are invisible to us, there is a symbol of the way of things, of what Chinese thinkers called the Dao. This book is an exercise in phenomenology: its aim is to expose the meaning of a familiar experience of beauty. The author shows how this experience, as expressive of the good and the true, is - in a sense deeper, perhaps, than Lawrence and Matisse intended - life-enhancing. Whether or not the book succeeds in its aim will be judged by people who, in the words of one travel writer, can find 'no escape from the mirror-like expanse' of a gleaming sea: it is an experience that follows them about like an 'all-pervading, inevitable melody'.

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