



I assume readers will readily accept the premise that contemporary society is in the midst of an environmental crisis. We can avoid wading through the litany of studies and statistics showing rates of deforestation, desertification, sea level rise, ocean acidification, global warming, etc. But two striking studies from last year highlight the severity of the issue. First, the World Wildlife Fund estimates that if the current acceleration of environmental degradation continues, two-thirds of all existing plant and animal species will vanish by 2050. Second, the MacArthur Foundation predicts that by the same year there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean. We can see how dire things have become. But what caused this problem?

I contend that the root of the issue is the belief that Man is separate from Nature. The Western perspective that humans are partially unnatural has circulated at least since Plato first expounded his *theory of recollection*, in which he argued that we retain stored memories of a world we once *knew* prior to entering *this* spatiotemporal world of everyday experience, which Plato deemed less real.

Then, Aristotle, following in the footsteps of Plato, continued to emphasize that Man is partially unnatural. In Aristotle's *Great Chain of Being*, Man straddles the divide between Animal and Celestial Being. He classifies humans in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as 'rational' (unnatural) 'animals' (natural) and states that living a life of contemplation will make humans happiest – i.e., surpassing the contentment of all other animals.

In accordance with the Aristotelian and Platonic views, Christianity embraces the unnatural quality of Man, preaching that the soul is separate from the body and will live on for all eternity in heaven; a perfect world beyond this natural one. Christianity asserts that Man is made in God's image (unnatural) and positioned as 'master' of the rest of creation (nature). "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon'" (Genesis 1:26).

At least for Aristotle and Medieval Christian theologians, all of Nature is teleological: living things possessing essences that, when satisfied, nurture contentment. In the Middle Ages, for instance, it was argued that one of the ways God demonstrated benevolence was by providing all life with the means to satisfy its needs and flourish.

Descartes undermined this beatific worldview by claiming that only humans have a soul/mind/consciousness. All other life forms function as mindless automatons, automatically responding to the environment around them like billiard balls with no subjective desires capable of satisfaction. The Cartesian division of Man from Nature becomes clear in his famous phrase that launched Modern philosophy, *Cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"). This formalizes the dualistic conception of reality: a metaphysics separating the inward intentional side that is isolated and unassailable from the rest of the world and the natural side that is the same as and connected with the rest of the world. Obviously, the fact that only humans have 'minds' reinforces our unnatural peculiarity.

A common modern humanist outlook is that "Man is the measure of all things," meaning only humans can bestow value. John Locke

explicitly echoes this position by claiming that labor is the lone source of value and natural objects acquire value only after being acted upon by Man with our 'magical' labor power. The developing science of the time progressed under the assumption that the reason to study and come to understand Nature was to master it and bend it toward our will, with science and technology becoming a vehicle for controlling nature.

James Watt, the eighteenth-century inventor of the steam engine, wrote "nature can be conquered if we but find a way to her weak side." This statement reaffirms how pervasively the view that Man is separate from Nature runs through the Western intellectual tradition. Consequently, an important step for improving our disastrous relationship with the environment is to push for greater recognition that we are in fact part of nature and entirely natural ourselves.

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