

Nature, Natural, Naturally  
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Raymond Williams in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, writes that *Nature* is perhaps the most complex word in the language...any full history of the uses of *nature* would be a history of a large part of human thought.<sup>i</sup> If Williams is correct, then the first question is whether it is realistically possible to attempt an overall clarification of the term. A book by Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas in the 1930s listed sixty-six meanings of *nature*.<sup>ii</sup> How can one make generalizations about the meaning of *Nature*? The task would seem hopeless.

People continue to use the term *natural* so that an effort must be made to avoid total equivocation, as well as some ambiguities that might be dangerous. At the least, examining the complexity of this term might be a warning to some people that the issue is not settled. There is a widespread assumption today that, while in recent centuries *Nature* (in its relation to *Man*) was misunderstood, the issue has now been put right, at least in theory. The one sure conclusion which will emerge in this chapter is that any simple statement of the relation between the human and the natural is deficient. Only with a paradoxical formulation does one have a chance of comprehending this relation.

The relation between the human and the natural is of significance in almost every field of study and every aspect of existence. Sometimes, as in legal theory where *Natural law* is discussed, the meaning of *Natural* is obviously at stake. So also *Nature* and *Natural* show up in anthropology, sociology and psychology. The term is not so prominent in politics, economics or engineering but it always hovers in the background.

Is it possible to propose one meaning for the term *natural*, and if so, how does one proceed? If reaching a single meaning is unrealistic, how does one move from sixty-six, or some other unwieldy number of meanings, to a manageable and practical range of meanings? Peter Coates lists five main meanings that the term *nature* has had in western history.<sup>iii</sup> I would suggest that the main meanings can be reduced to three: *nature* as an inner principle of things; *nature* as what is not *Man*; *nature* as the name for everything. I will argue that the first and third meanings are compatible; the second is an historical aberration that is still with us but should be retired.

For any old and important term, two criteria are required to determine how best to use the term: First, the proposed meaning must somehow include the

etymology and all the major shifts in the term's history? Second, the proposed meaning must provide a consistent and comprehensive usage for today's problems?

The first criterion cannot be met without digging into the twists and turns of history. The most that this chapter can offer is snapshots of dramatic shifts in the term's history. Fortunately, for 2500 years there has been a continuous history with a relatively clear translation from one language to another. I will select a few people, such as Aristotle and Rousseau, and a few schools of thoughts, such as Stoicism and feminism, to illustrate the historical shifts of meaning.

### Ancient Beginnings

Why does the term nature exist at all? Sometimes one can give a precise answer to who first used a word and why the word was invented. In the case of old words, rich in meaning, the origin is usually too deeply embedded in history or pre-history to provide clear answers. With the term nature, however, we have some helpful historical sources that touch on the origin of the idea.

The Greek word for nature, *physis*, seems to have emerged with the origins of philosophy itself. Reflecting on the diversity and movement in the world, the early Greek philosophers sought to bring things into a unity and to explain change. What most struck them were living things that are born, grow, decline and die. The term nature seemingly was coined to identify the source of change in things. Living things have self-movement, that is, a source of change which itself does not change but instead gives stability to plants and animals over time.<sup>iv</sup>

The first place to take a snapshot of nature's history is Aristotle. The term has a history of many centuries before Aristotle but he is the first person we know of who tried to sort out and to synthesize the disparate meanings of nature. Aristotle thus becomes the conduit for much of what we know of nature before him. And Aristotle is a model for how to go about deciding on a word's meaning. Aristotle lists six meanings that the word had acquired by his time. From that summary he then attempts to give the primary and chief sense of the term.<sup>v</sup>

Aristotle's first meaning of natural is birth or origin; he attempts an etymological link between nature and birth. Although his etymology may have been inaccurate, nature and birth were associated before Aristotle and after him.<sup>vi</sup>

The connection was solidified by Cicero's choice of *natura* (from *natus*) as the word to translate *physis*. The English word took its lead from Latin and retained the connection to birth.

Aristotle's other meanings also survive to the present. Nature refers to what is inherent, to what is a source of motion, to what things are made of, to the primary being (or essence) of living things and by extension to the essence of every thing. From these six meanings Aristotle concludes that Nature is the primary being of those things that have in them the source of their own movement.<sup>vii</sup>

What Aristotle seems to be missing is the collective meaning of Nature that became prominent later and is sometimes thought to be the primary meaning. That is, nature as the aggregate of things, a name for the whole world is in some eras the main meaning of Nature. While there is nothing necessarily wrong with this evolution of the word, it is helpful to remember that the collective meaning was the secondary not the primary meaning. It may still be helpful to start by thinking of nature as the inner principle of living things more so than as a general name.

The contrast here is not exactly between concrete and abstract meanings. Even at the individual level Nature is an abstraction, not a perceptible reality but a philosophical concept invented as an explanation. The Hebrew Bible, for example, has nothing to say about Nature; it lacks the word.<sup>viii</sup> The Bible of the Jews (the Christian Old Testament) has plenty to say about plants and animals, as well as the human relation to the world of living things. But in contrast to Greek philosophy, the Hebrew Bible speaks in concrete terms of flesh and blood and breath.

Jews, Christians and others have to be careful about reading the concept of Nature back into the Hebrew Bible. High blown generalizations about the Jewish attitude to nature are bound to be inaccurate. The problem of abstraction has been compounded by the coining of the twentieth-century neologism Judeo-Christian, usually followed by the term tradition. The phrase does not do justice to either Jewish or Christian or tradition. It hides the differences between Jewish and Christian traditions, as well as differences within both Jewish history and Christian history, and the relation of their respective Bibles to later developments.

In addition to the relation of particular and general meanings in the use of Nature, the other main question throughout the centuries has been the relation of the humans to nature. The era of Plato and Aristotle, the fourth century B.C.E., represents one of the first great shifts in the meaning of Nature. The developed speculative systems of Plato and Aristotle gave a new prominence to individual human life and to rational concepts for speculating on the human relation to the cosmos. It was now possible to think of the human being as in some sense an outsider to the natural world of other living beings. Earlier religions may have

implied this outsider status but philosophical concepts, such as being, nature, essence, form, matter and soul forced some explicit choices.

At his trial, Socrates spoke of a soul that would survive his death, a belief that seems to entail that the real human being is an outsider to earth's cycle of birth, growth, decline, death and rebirth. Other Platonic dialogues also suggest an eternal, immutable form as more real than the perceived world.

Aristotle, in contrast to Plato, was a biologist, keenly attentive to the material world around him. Despite hints that intellect is separable from matter, Aristotle treated humans as living beings who have a nature. Human nature acts through powers that can be trained by habits of intellectual and moral excellence. One might say that Aristotle's first interest is neither the noun *Nature* nor the adjective *Natural* but the adverb *Naturally*. Living beings act naturally when their acts flow from what they are and action is directed toward its proper good.

For Aristotle, humans have a superior position of power and self-reflection but they are still governed by the laws that govern living things. Ernst Mayr is unfair to Aristotle in saying "For theologians and philosophers alike, man was a creature apart from the rest of life. Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant agreed in this, no matter how much they disagreed in other aspects of their philosophies." Surely Aristotle and Descartes differed in their view of animals (Descartes thought them mechanisms) and the human relation to (other) animals. Aristotle was aware of the paradox: that the human is neither *A part of nature* nor *Apart from nature*. Aristotle's nature remained concretely realized in each living being, including human individuals.

A second snapshot of nature's history is from several centuries after Aristotle, about the time of the Christian era. A group of writers known to history as the Stoics made a permanent impression on *Nature*. Christianity absorbed considerable amounts of Stoicism into its ethics. And even today, or especially today, a kind of Stoicism is evident in discussions of the environment.

The Stoics were one of the groups to move *Nature* in the direction of becoming co-extensive with the cosmos. At the same time, philosophical thinking had become more conscious that the human's possession of reason gave them a perspective different from others. The world was made for gods and men - those who possessed reason - according to the Stoic Chrysippus (280-207 B.C.E.). But clearly the men are in a position of subordination.<sup>x</sup> Nature is all enveloping; if men claim to be independent they will only increase their suffering and eventually death will prove who is stronger.

The Stoics began recognition of what became the faculty of free will, but they advocated acceptance of nature as the only wise course to follow. A wonderful allegory, attributed to either Zeno or Chrysippus, captures the relation of humans and nature. If a dog is tied, as it were, to a wagon, then if the dog wishes to follow, it will both be pulled and follow, acting by its own choice together with necessity; but if it does not wish to follow, it will in any case be compelled. The same applies to human beings....<sup>x</sup>

The practical consequences of this philosophy are evident in the writings of the Stoic, Epictetus. The author, a Greek speaking Roman slave, advises human acceptance of whatever nature demands, including death. If you kiss your child or wife, say that you are kissing a human being; for when it dies you will not be upset....What upsets people is not things themselves but their judgments about things. For example, death is nothing dreadful (or else it would have appeared dreadful to Socrates) but instead the judgment about death that it is dreadful - *that* is dreadful....Just as a target is not set up to be missed, in the same way nothing bad by nature happens in the world.<sup>xii</sup>

The language of Man and nature appears with Stoicism but the earlier language of living natures, including human nature, does not disappear. Not until the seventeenth century does the language of man and nature become standard fare.

Man and nature did not become the language of Christianity because Stoicism's metaphysical picture was unacceptable. Christianity starts from the idea of a creator of living beings and, at the center of those beings is the human being as the priest of all creation. To early Christianity, Plato seemed to be the perfect match. A school known as neoplatonism shaped much of the theology of the West.

Neoplatonic thought, like early Greek philosophy, saw an organic unity to the world. Humans are not apart from the other natures. All natures participate in a world soul, even though human reason is recognized as a superior power. Human reason is a participant in reason which itself participates in a much greater reality. What especially distinguishes neoplatonism is a push beyond being to the ultimate source called the One. Neoplatonism has often been interpreted as a disparagement of the material world because matter is at the bottom of a ladder. But there is no corresponding ladder upward; humans find salvation not by despising and fleeing this world but by a journey inward.<sup>xiii</sup>

Neoplatonism's distinction between beings and the One provided the

framework for Thomas Aquinas's distinction between the essence or nature of a thing and its act of to be. Human nature exists by participation in *to be*. Nature or natures are given a positive place but their act of being is received.

The human being has a human nature which determines what it is, but *who* the person is goes beyond *what* a person is. Each person is unique not from its nature but because of its act of being. Human life is not subordinated to a law of nature. Ethical questions have to respect the limits of nature while going beyond the fixed forms of nature.

Neoplatonic thought was the framework within which the rediscovery of Aristotle occurred in the middle ages. Aristotle's physics and biology kept neoplatonism from losing touch with the empirical world. Thomas Aquinas managed to unite the two traditions but the end of the Renaissance brought out a conflict between a desiccated Aristotelianism on one side and a neoplatonic philosophy allied with magic on the other side.

### The Roots of Modern Nature

Modern scholarship traces the beginnings of modern science to the twelfth century when Christian thinkers developed a distinction between the natural and the supernatural.<sup>xiv</sup> The significance of this language was that it asserted the intelligibility of natural things and the human ability to exercise control by the use of rational methods.

Contemporary critics of Christianity often have little understanding of the distinction between natural and supernatural. The meaning of *nature* is therefore lost if one assumes that it is being opposed to man or history or culture. For Thomas Aquinas, the nature does not exist on its own; nature is the intelligible form of living beings, including the human. The natural within a supernatural world indicated human limitation.

The seventeenth century brought about the greatest shift since Aristotle in the meaning of nature. There was a continuity with the science and the *practical arts* of the middle ages, but also a discontinuity hidden under the term *nature*. The common belief that science and religion were at war in the seventeenth century is inaccurate. The new physicist wanted nothing so much as a philosophy of nature that harmonized with mainstream Christianity, the better to combat the socio-religious threat of magic.<sup>xv</sup> The theologians were only too happy to join with the scientists. Both groups were fighting a magic, partly derived from neoplatonism, in which nature was a force within living things. The

mathematical sciences and Christian theology combined to reduce Nature to objective data.

Scientists took over the phrase natural revelation that had emerged in the middle ages as the younger sister of supernatural revelation. Gradually, this underling edged out the supernatural. Even among the theologians, except those who moved in the direction of biblical literalism, the main and practical source of knowledge was the natural revelation.

Natural revelation turned out to be a bad bargain for theology when the only natural revelation became the unveiling of nature itself. Nature acquired most of the attributes that had been assigned to God (self-sufficiency, prime mover, eternal). In the seventeenth century, motion was thought to be supplied from outside matter; the need for a mover was the premise from which the existence of God was proved. But when the eighteenth century decided that nature contains motion within itself, it became possible to speak of God or Nature interchangeably (*Deus sive Natura*) which led to the choice of either God or Nature (*Deus aut Natura*). By that time Nature held the stronger hand.

The supreme place of nature or Nature in eighteenth century thought had overtones of Stoicism. Nature was to be revered as mother of us all, an attitude that is evident in the nature mysticism of modern romantic movements. However, the main current of modern science stood against a reverence for nature as the great mother.

In the Stoic parable a small dog is tied to a large cart and has only the choice of trotting along with the cart or being dragged by the cart. By the seventeenth century, the dog (Man) had grown up and thought it could now drag the cart. Whereas first-century Stoics advised acceptance of nature's ways, the seventeenth century invented the language of man conquering nature. The person who most clearly brings together the two strands of modern thought, reverence for nature and power over nature, is Francis Bacon (1561-1626).

Bacon was as influential as any one individual for shaping the meaning of nature during the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. Abstract man was set in contrast to abstract nature. The verbs that Bacon used to describe the relation were command and conquer.<sup>xvi</sup>

Far from thinking that conquest is arrogant, Bacon describes the needed attitude as one of humility. His governing metaphor was a bridal chamber or a nuptial couch for the mind and the universe.<sup>xvii</sup> Many contemporary feminists are

appalled by this metaphor but, for Bacon, the scientist is a gallant suitor who must use chastity, respect and restraint. Bacon condemns those who value knowledge in itself; This is to use as a mistress for pleasure what ought to be a spouse for fruit.<sup>xviii</sup>

The danger in Bacon's use of *Man's* is that under the cover of abstract man's power over abstract nature, some men have power over other men, men have power over women and the humans have exploitative power over other living species. The chaste and reverent attitude toward nature which Bacon professed was overwhelmed by the instrumental attitude of seeing nature as an object for control and profit. Nature, as C.S. Lewis would later write, is *the name for what we have, to some extent, conquered.*<sup>xix</sup>

For an understanding of Francis Bacon one must be aware of the theological framework he was assuming, something contemporary commentators usually miss.<sup>xx</sup> For Bacon, man's religious duty is to read the Book of Nature and restore human control over nature. As in so many authors since the twelfth century, Bacon posits three stages to history.<sup>xxi</sup> In the first stage, nature was free and develops herself in her ordinary course. In the second stage, nature is affected by the insubordination of matter; man and nature are at odds with each other. In the third stage, nature will be molded by art and human ministry.<sup>xxii</sup>

Far from thinking that Christianity had brought about dominion over nature, Bacon was critical of the failure in the past to exercise that power. Like Rousseau, Kant, Schiller and other later writers, Bacon foresaw a third age in which nature and art come together in harmony. The title page of *The Great Instauration* has the prayer *May he graciously grant to us to write an apocalypse or true vision of the footsteps of the Creator imprinted on his creatures.*<sup>xxiii</sup> For today's reader, the term apocalypse may suggest violence, but apocalypse simply meant revelation. This apocalyptic vision is intended to support Bacon's marriage metaphor: the search for a harmonious union of man and nature as the fulfillment of history.

The writer who perhaps offers the best litmus test for today's difficulty in grasping the meaning of nature is Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Living more than a century after Bacon's abstract nature and in the midst of the eighteenth-century's glorification of nature, Rousseau carries an earlier view of nature into the modern world.

For Rousseau, the opposite of nature is *society*, a word whose meaning he helped to shape. His educational treatise, *Emile*, which opens with a well known

description of the clash of man and nature, is easy to misread. Rousseau is not referring to the relation of human and nonhuman; he is not praising nature in contrast to the ways of humans. Nature refers to the inner life of the individual man (and woman). This human nature's destiny is as a reasoning being whose life is governed by ethical and religious convictions.

Rousseau published *Emile* in the same year as his better known work *Social Contract* (1762). But the usual interpretation of *Emile*, as a hands-off attitude for the development of an autonomous individual, makes it an apolitical book rather than an education for political transformation.<sup>xxiv</sup> Summaries of *Emile* usually indicate that the reader did not get beyond the first two pages or at most the first two of five books. With that to go on, the reader is almost certain to misread what Nature means for Rousseau and what kind of education he is recommending. Human nature requires instruction. After age twelve, which Rousseau calls the age of reason, the boy is subjected to regular lessons on politics, ethics, sex and religion, preparing him to be husband and father in the family that is to be a microcosm of political revolution.

The usual interpretation of *Emile* leaves inexplicable how Rousseau became the inspiration for the rationalistic philosophy that followed from him. When Karl Barth went looking for the origins of modern Protestant theology he found it is from Rousseau onward and originating from Rousseau that the thing called theological rationalism, in the full sense of the term, exists.<sup>xxv</sup>

Some of Rousseau's catchy phrases and images contribute to the misunderstanding of his complex meaning of nature. He is famous for referring to a state of nature a phrase that leads to the assumption that he is educating Emile to live in a state outside civilized life.<sup>xxvi</sup> However, Rousseau writes that the man who speaks of the state of nature speaks of a state which no longer exists, which may never have existed, and which probably never will exist.<sup>xxvii</sup> Rousseau staunchly opposed the Christian doctrine of original sin but he was faced with explaining how a pure human nature gets entangled in the messes it does. Rousseau keeps the idea of an Edenic state of nature before a psychological fall into society's corruption.

The root of this moral failure, trying to live according to society's expectations, lies in the flight from death. Unless humans control their fear of dying they love a false version of their selves and so make themselves miserable. At the end of book three, Emile is to have learned that death is a necessity of nature. To live free and to depend little on human beings is the best way of learning how to die.<sup>xxviii</sup>

This attitude of accepting death is possible because in book four we read *I* no longer sense that I am anything but the work and instrument of the great Being who wants what is good, who does it and who will do what is good for me....<sup>xxxix</sup> His attitude to death is that *I* aspire to the moment when freed from the shackles of the body, I shall be *me* without contradiction or division.<sup>xxx</sup> Rousseau could not solve his problem of (human) nature without recourse to religious beliefs. He found those beliefs in *A* true Christianity.<sup>@</sup>This true Christianity or *A* natural religion<sup>@</sup> turns out to be eighteenth-century Deism.<sup>xxxi</sup>

### Contemporary Geography of Meaning

Besides the history of the term, one has to attend to its contemporary uses, what I have referred to as the geography of its meaning. The history and the geography of meaning meet in the present. It can be somewhat arbitrary where to draw a line between (past) history and present use. The present meaning of a term refers to a time that is more than this month or this year or this decade. In the case of *A* nature,<sup>@</sup>we seem to be undergoing a drastic change that started four or five decades ago.

The best way to identify the meaning of a term in its present use is to ask what the meaning excludes, that is, nature as opposed to what. There are dozens of candidates for this position but I will comment on three of the most common: artificiality, culture, nurture.

What are we to make of artificiality these days? When today's advertisers claim that the bread, the beer or the ice cream is *A*ll natural,<sup>@</sup>the claim entails a denial of anything *A*rtificial<sup>@</sup>in the ingredients of the food. This assumption that natural is good and artificial is bad represents a dramatic shift over the last half century. But during the same time, the genetic engineering of foods has continued to expand, which suggests some inconsistency in the value of the natural, as opposed to the artificial. Is the irradiation of food natural while the addition of chemicals is not natural? Raymond Williams notes that *A*nature is what man has not made, though if he made it long enough ago - a hedgerow or a desert - it will usually be included as *n*atural.<sup>xxxii</sup> The simple clear contrast of natural and artificial thus has many shady edges. All artificiality is not opposed to nature; artifice is what human beings do. But some artificiality does violence to human or nonhuman natures.

A second and more ambiguous contrast these days is one that is made between nature and culture. Peter Coates begins his history of nature by referring to *A*n elemental juxtaposition of nature and culture.<sup>@</sup><sup>xxxiii</sup> He goes so far

as to say that without a concept of culture as the works of humankind, there can be no concept of nature.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The problem here is that this meaning of culture is quite recent and remains highly ambiguous. Although in past centuries culture would have been in some tension with nature, it was by no means its simple opposite. Culture began as an agricultural metaphor and even in some uses today it reflects an intimate relation to the natural. The meaning of nature depends not only on the word to which it is set in opposition, but also to the era and the social context when such a contrast is made.

A third opposite to nature is nurture, a pairing that goes back about a century and a half but shows no sign of disappearing. Dispassionate commentators on this pair of words regularly say that it is not an either/or choice. Is it not obvious that both nature and nurture are important in human life?. While everyone might agree with that proposition it does not stop passionate advocacy on one side or the other

The reason why this debate never seems to go anywhere except in circles is the extraordinary ambiguity in what are assumed to be the names of two sides. The nature in the debate is human nature but the common meaning of nature as forces opposed to the human keeps creeping in. On the other side, nurture can quite logically be thought to be intrinsic to human nature (though not to most natures). However, nurture sometimes includes the human employment of environment (one of the meanings of nature). That is, just about anything can show up on either side of this confused debate.<sup>xxxv</sup>

There has been some serious struggle with the meaning of nature in two most prominent movements in the latter half of the twentieth century: feminism and environmentalism. The movements have sometimes run parallel, at other times they converge or overlap. A feminist complaint about man and nature was obviously to be expected after the general linguistic change in the use of man. With only the two categories of man and nature, women had most often been implicitly on the side of nature, that is, part of the world that needed taming. But one should note it is the relation that needs changing, which is not accomplished simply by replacing man with human.

When one moves away from abstract man and abstract nature, there is no way to state the relation between men and women as a single relation. The natures of men and women are in question, as well as the natures of each living thing and the cycle of life. The issue of women being oppressed or excluded is inseparable from the environmental or ecological question.

Many authors today continue to speak of man and nature, especially when the topic is a grand historical, scientific or philosophical generality. No one should rewrite past literature to eliminate man or assume that the use of man was always oppressive. Nevertheless, the language of man and nature deserves to be completely retired; it is incapable of addressing today's problems. The language of humans and nature may be an improvement, but if it is assumed to be a solution, it can further obscure the deeper problems.

A different tack is taken by some writers in ecology who think that man should be absorbed into nature.<sup>xxxvi</sup> That would be a comprehensive solution but one that cannot be consistently stated. If nature is all, then any human project, other than rapid elimination, is in the wrong direction. There may be a few Stoics today who believe in submission to Nature but university professors hardly fit the profile. If in the past, man was said to be outside nature, the picture cannot be righted by a simple reversal that would put man inside nature. Nature embracing man may seem to be an irenic picture but it is one that raises more problems than it solves.

Jane Jacobs, in the forward to a book on urban design, writes: "The basic premise is that human beings exist wholly within nature as part of natural order in every respect.... Readers unwilling or unable to breach a barrier they imagine separates human kind and its works from the rest of nature will be unable to hear what this book is saying."<sup>xxxvii</sup> Jacobs should not assume that readers who disagree with her cannot breach a barrier they imagine separates humankind and nature.. Someone might argue that while humankind is not *separate* from the rest of nature, Jacobs's own work on urban design shows that neither are humans wholly within nature as part of natural order in every respect. In some respects humans exist in a natural order, in other respects humans change that order.

The ecological question is not whether humans should tamper with nature. Human activity has an effect on human nature and other natures. The question is what kinds of human actions might be doing damage to important ecological systems. Because human knowledge is always limited, what seems to be progress in one part of the world may be causing horrendous problems in another geographical or temporal part of the world. Jules Baggini has great fun in ridiculing people who want to rely on what is natural and, for example, are concerned about genetically modified food. With food and other necessary human resources it is a legitimate question to ask what is compatible with human nature: the health of humans both short term and long term, as well as what is compatible with natures in the human environment.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

## Summary

It is apparent from both the historical survey and from the full range of today's problems that the relation of human(s) and nature(s) cannot be stated as a simple choice of inside or outside. Neither is the language of part and whole adequate. In some sense, humans can be said to be *within* nature, if nature is taken to be the sum total of things. But from the time of pre-socratic philosophy to the present, *nature* is in some sense *within* the human. Certainly human nature is within humans and so is the very idea of nature.

An abstract meaning of nature needs to be regularly grounded in particular beings, human and nonhuman. What needs examining today is not *man and nature* or *humans and nature* but the relation of men and men, women and women, men and women, adults and children, humans and nonhuman animals, humans and other living beings, and the ecological systems of living beings (including men and women) in a physical environment.

Then when we try to generalize about the human relation to nature we will look for alternatives to *in/out*, *conquer/conform to*, *above/below*. We might, for example, say that human activity should respect the natural order while not necessarily conforming to it; that human actions should work with the rhythms and contours of nature, both human and nonhuman.

The etymological root of *nature*, what is given by birth, is still present in the word's use today. The natural world is one in which organisms are born, grow, decline and die. Humans cannot avoid *interfering* in the processes of birth, development and death. That interference is true of their own cycle of birth and death, as well as the cycles of birth and death all around them. This intrusion ought to assume that human knowledge is always scanty (even about humans) and that harm is likely if the intrusion is violent.

Short of all humans becoming Jain monks, humans will remain the great killers; they cannot breathe, wash, eat or walk across the grass without killing. The world of natural things involves killing but that is not a licence for humans to kill whatever they wish and to kill in any manner. The first principle of ethics should be *do violence to no one*. It is an ideal that humans should strive for but realize they can never fulfill, a fact that makes apology and forgiveness integral to ethics.

The phrase *natural law* goes back as far as the Romans. For the Stoics it

may have been an accurate description of their ethics. The law of nature determined that Man was called to submit to Nature. In the Christian middle ages the natural was related to the supernatural, both within the human and in the whole of creation. Grace (or the supernatural) was said to build on nature; human actions were in this supernaturally ordered world. While the natural, as the substrate of the supernatural, should not be violated or dismissed, the life of persons in community is not dictated by the natural order of things.

In the last three centuries, natural law advocates have generally fought a losing battle against a variety of positions that have emphasized human freedom and creativity. Discussion of natural law received a boost at the time of the Nuremberg trials. Surely there is something wrong with executing millions of people even if a nation's laws do not forbid it. International and environmental events since that time have continued to raise the question of natural law but without persuading many people of its validity.

What is needed is a conversation between peoples of East and West, North and South, a conversation that might learn from earlier philosophy and religion as well as today's science. There might be achievable agreements on what not to do to nature(s) even if there is no agreement on one law or a set of laws called natural.

It would be helpful if the word unnatural were saved for those actions that directly violate a thing's nature or an ecological system. Attaching electrodes to someone's gums or genitals is an unnatural act; it does violence to a human's nature. Some of the ways in which the life of an individual are being extended in today's hospitals may be unnatural, a violent intrusion into the process of dying when there is no realistic hope of the person returning to life in a human community. One can also say that acts such as polluting a river, which once seemed harmless, may rank as unnatural acts.

In contrast, some things once thought to be unnatural can now be seen as a variation in human nature. That especially applies to sexual activity. Humans, like other animals, naturally reproduce through sexual union. But human nature has always allowed a playful side to sexual activity. Humans have been imaginative and creative in using sexual organs, much to the shock of neighbors who have not encountered that action. Throughout Western history the term unnatural was attached to same-sex practices. Today the practice of homosexuality is generally accepted as a variation in human activity that does not violate (human) nature.

Dying is one of the activities of natural things. A human being, shaped by a human nature, is a natural being that dies. But humans are not merely natural. Who they are is distinctly personal, which is in tension with the natural order both within and outside their bodies. Human death is personal and communal. Human death is a biological event but it is not wholly describable in biological terms. Politics, art, science and religion are a refusal to accept the biological limits of personal life.

Kubler-Ross's insistence that death is natural assumes a very limited choice. The alternatives are either to accept death as biologically necessary or else to be hooked to a machine that will not allow death its place. The choice is between the biological and the technological. But if human nature includes both the biological and the capacity for the technological, then the choice which is offered today is not the only one possible. There may be other ways to resist the dehumanizing of death than by talking about natural death.

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i. Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, 184, 186.

ii. Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas, 447-56.

iii. Peter Coates, *Nature...*, 3: His five are: physical place more or less unmodified by people; collective phenomena of the world or universe; essence of things; inspiration and guide for people; conceptual opposite of culture

iv. R.G. Collingwood, *Nature*

v. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*,

vi. According to David Ross, Aristotle's mistakes the origin of the word

vii. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*

viii. The word first appears in medieval Hebrew

ix. Ernst Mayr, 24.

x. For quotation from Chrsippus, Coates, *Nature*, 27.

xi. Sharples, *Studies*, 77; Hippolytus, *Philosophy* 21.

xii. Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, #13, #5, #27.

xiii. Neoplatonism

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- xiv. Chenu, 12th c and
- xv. Wertheim, 83.
- xvi. New Organon 118-19.
- xvii. Great Instauration, 14.
- xviii. Advance, Book 1, p 35 in Everyman ed
- xix. C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 82.
- xx. Leiss as exception, 48-71.
- xxi. Joachim
- xxii. New Organon, 273.
- xxiii. Great Instauration, 29.
- xxiv. Jane Martin is one of few commentators who emphasizes the political implications of *Emile*
- xxv. Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 233.
- xxvi. Rousseau expressly denies this is his intent, *Emile*, ?
- xxvii. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, Preface, 169; also Nietzsche in Ansell-Pearson, 50
- xxviii. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, 208.
- xxix. Ibid., 292.
- xxx. Ibid., 293.
- xxxi. Ibid., 294.
- xxxii. Raymond Williams, 188.
- xxxiii. Peter Coates, *Nature*, 1.
- xxxiv. Peter Coates, *Nature*, 6
- xxxv. Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, 2001, wades into

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this debate with the supreme confidence that he has the scientific information to settle the debate. Unfortunately, he never asks whether the terms of the debate make sense, starting with the title and the subtitle of the book which are in conflict. A blank slate, far from being a denial of human nature is a very clear idea of human nature. The slate may be empty but the more important fact is that it is a slate.

xxxvi. For example, Taylor, *Respect for Nature*,

xxxvii. Jane Jacobs, *Nature of Economies*, Preface.

xxxviii. Jules Baggini, *Making Sense* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 182: When communities rely on natural sources, they expose themselves to disease. At the very least, they need unnatural apparatus, such as pumps, to access clean water supplies. Anyone who suggests we would do better to go back to nature for our water supply is frankly nuts. At the end of the chapter, he notes that the argument over genetically modified foods includes the question of human health but that is a scientific question not a philosophical one (194). I would suggest that whether scientific or philosophical, that is the main question being raised about unnatural foods.