



THINKING ABOUT “NATURE”: TWO WAYS OF SEEING THE WORLD AND OUR PLACE IN IT.

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Sunflowers blooming along the road at Achterberg Wildlife-Friendly Demonstration Farm. Photo by Ron Klataske

In his first major work, published in 1836, the quintessential American sage Ralph Waldo Emerson addressed the topic of *Nature*. Emerson pointedly inquired, “To what end is nature?” What is it *for*? What are its uses and value? In his highly original transcendentalist way, Emerson addressed these questions under seven headings: “Commodity;” “Beauty;” “Language;” “Discipline;” “Idealism;” “Spirit;” and “Prospects.” The first of these categories still resonates culturally with considerable power today. Nature as commodity can be readily translated into weights and measures, dollars and cents. A search for terms that will adequately and persuasively define the alternative view must be based first on the recognition that seeing nature merely as commodity is limiting at best.

Older ways of categorizing the processes of the human mind in organizing and understanding the world and our relation to it distinguished between “Instrumental Reason” and “Wisdom” or “Sapience.” In both Judaeo-Christian and Classical contexts, the latter always has a strongly developed moral aspect: in Biblical terms, “the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God;” in classical terms, Roman piety was the subordination of the self and selfish interests to the

apprehension of transcendent values: duty, family, friendship, the state, and *mores maiorum*, or tradition. In our modern concept of the operations of the mind, instrumental reason is about all that we are typically left with—discursive reason, that adds up two and two to get four, that pursues the most efficient way to make the trains run on time . . .

There is a neatness and irrefutability in $2 + 2 = 4$ in the balance-sheet; there is a potent immediacy in the apprehension of the phenomenal world as a collection of manipulable things—water rights, pest control, improvement of crop yields through massive chemical manipulation of the soil—severing them from their larger connections and implications, and seeing them solely from the perspective of immediate results from a narrowly defined spectrum of human, or even private, gain. Perhaps paradoxically, Plato defined what we might call *moral* failings as an *intellectual* problem: a failure of measurement, the adoption of a faulty perspective. Consequences distant in time or space seem small and inconsequential. Failing to properly reflect on ends, on the larger, holistic contexts of our problems and policies, taking short views and looking to immediate prospects—these embody the besetting sin or moral failing of our

social, political, economic attitudes.

Instrumental reason operates in the modality of manipulating things. It inevitably distances the objects of its attention and agency. As a consequence of the dominance of instrumental reason in our economic system and attitudes toward the world, nature and society have been placed in separate compartments, with nature as the passive source of materials and resources, and society as agent and decision-maker. The “‘governing conceit’ [of our economic system] is that nature exists outside society and may therefore ‘be coded, quantified and rationalized to serve economic growth.’”¹ “Capitalism’s ecological project . . . is to enlarge the quotient of ‘unpaid nature,’ like that of unpaid labour, in the total value of saleable commodities.”² It is undeniable that products of this bloodless objectivity in the manipulation of nature have included great achievements and human betterment. But as Feste, Shakespeare’s Fool in *Twelfth Night*, pronounces, “Truly, sir, pleasure will be paid, one time or another.” Benjamin Kunkel outlines the process of paying the consequences of our relentless application of instrumental reason:

. . . the law of entropy stipulates that using compact and versatile energy-dense materials (say, precious metals or fossil fuels) yields less serviceable and energy-dense materials (cans in the recycling bin) if not outright waste (discarded batteries) and pollution (power plant emissions). Over the long run, transforming useful resources into useless waste rules out economic growth.³

So the ultimate brake on our dream of “a perpetually increasing ecological surplus” is a fundamental law of physics, the law of entropy:

. . . degradation of the biosphere through carbon emissions, soil degradation, biodiversity

loss, chemical toxicity, and so on. A sufficiently tattered web of life will yield ‘negative value’ rather than any positive plenty: no application of capital or labour, in any amount, will be able to produce anything but goods of generally inferior quality and quantity.⁴

Our society’s subordination of nature to instrumental reason in pursuit of short-term social and economic gain has set in motion a process doomed in the long run by the second law of thermodynamics, no less than the iron laws of economics. To persist in tattering the web of life mindlessly in pursuit of short-term gains or quarterly earnings is to adopt the morally untenable position of Louis XIV: *Après moi le deluge*.

So what is on offer from that alternative view of our relation to nature—the one that is so hard to comprehend under a single term? How can it be understood? It is a comprehensive view. It considers the essential role played by every part in the functioning of the whole biome, the Web of Nature, which we are only beginning to understand in part. It is synthetic and holistic, not partial and end-gaining. It embodies elements of wisdom or sapience, and an up-dated conception of pietas before the transcendent order of nature.


It must seem absurd to go about to construct rational arguments championing pleasure or joy. But to slight the human importance of emotions and feelings in an argument about ways of seeing nature would be to ignore one of the most powerful and widespread responses provoked in our kind generally: the satisfaction of curiosity, wonder, and sympathy elicited by learning the lives and habits of animals, birds, and fishes, and all manner of the creatures with whom we share the earth; the response to the calm and beauty of a sunrise or sunset, or a familiar

¹ Benjamin Kunkel, “The Capitalocene,” a review in *The London Review of Books*, volume 39, number 5, 2 March 2017, of *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, by Jeremy Davis, *Capitalism and the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*, by Jason Moore, and *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-Power and the Roots of Global Warming*, by Andreas Malm. p. 24, Kunkel quoting Moore.

² Ibid., p. 25. Kunkel summarizing Moore.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.



prospect silvered by moonlight; the appreciation of form and color in the survey of natural landscape; the sensation of the sublime in the presence of boundless prairie vistas, soaring mountains, the endless drama of wild surf pounding rugged rocky shores. As Emerson asserts, “The primary forms, as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us delight in and for themselves.”

In Plato’s categorization of goods, these things are goods in themselves, however they may also have a share in producing goods beyond themselves. And surely one of those external goods, though perhaps not measurable in terms of exchange value, is the service of nature in restoring and maintaining our spiritual and emotional health. I am somewhat diffident about mobilizing arguments based on aesthetics and emotional responses, on joy and pleasure, because to pragmatic persons such arguments generally appear frivolous or beside the point; and it is pragmatic persons as the directors of instrumental reason who, above all, must be convinced to look beyond a view of nature in solely utilitarian terms, the terms of exchange value or monetary worth.

But if the pragmatic person would put aside for a moment his learned, adult, worldly attitudes and reflect on his experiences and enthusiasms as a little child, perhaps he might recover some of that gratification of curiosity and interest, that pleasure and delight, with which he once explored the natural world. A great teacher once taught that, in order to enter into the kingdom of God, one must become as a little child again. “The kingdom of God,” satori, which is the Buddhist adept’s enlightenment, are close to us in the child’s disinterested delight and desire to understand, in the rest and “at-onement” that comes in our contemplation of nature; closer than they are in the marketplace or counting-house, and in our compulsion to pursue commodity and control.

The terms commodity and holistic appreciation, while seemingly antagonistic, need not be presented as an either/or choice. Clearly, as our civilization is

constituted, we must raise crops, utilize resources, engage in what have been called “improvements” in the service of “progress.” We cannot, as things stand, entirely do without extractive industries. But we must do these things prudently, while wisely considering the demands of the holistic view, and the integrity of the Web of Nature. I mentioned above that the alternative view to seeing nature as commodity involves even a moral discipline. Moral discipline inculcates the virtue of humility, the suppression of selfish interests and boundless self-aggrandizement in favor of the greater good of the larger community, a dutiful submission of the ego and its boundless desires to something greater than the self, something that was before the individual and will remain after her departure.

We have become the only species that by its conscious actions can achieve wholesale alterations in the natural environment, even to the degree of disrupting the entire global balance of nature. This evolutionary status enjoins upon us that contemporary version of Roman *pietas* that is the striving to understand the manifold relations in the web of nature, and the adoption of an attitude of stewardship toward our environment; the piety of dutifully respecting and cherishing the natural order in which we find our inherited place: in other words, living what Aldo Leopold called a “conservation aesthetic” and “the land ethic.” “Thinking Like a Mountain” and Part III of his *A Sand County Almanac*, and *Sketches Here and There*, ought to be required reading for every citizen and stakeholder today.

If these injunctions sound unrealistic and insubstantial to practical people and the engineers and planners who cannot see beyond instrumental reason, there is also a retributive justice to be considered. On those who, seeing commodity as all in all, would ignore these moral imperatives, Nature in fact enforces her claims by sterner measures than the mere curtailment of joy, as testified by a most unlikely nineteenth-century witness, Frederick Engels. Engels “generalized [Karl] Marx’s concern with soil exhaustion into something like a law of environmental blowback.”

Let us not . . . flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places, it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first . . . Thus at every step we're reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly.

It was Francis Bacon, who has been called the herald of modernity and “the philosopher of industrial science,” and who was perhaps Engels’ inspiration for that last clause, who recognized that “Nature to be commanded must be obeyed,” an injunction paraphrased in the motto on the seal of the Kansas State University of Agriculture and Applied Science: “Rule by obeying nature’s laws.” We have failed to recognize that the nature of that rule and command must be that of the enlightened constitutional sovereign who reigns in the interests of the commonwealth, not that of the arbitrary despot, indulging his selfish ends.

Far from being dismissible as mere birdwatcher hobbyists or impractical tree-huggers, Audubon of Kansas and similar environmental groups are themselves the champions of this new ethic and attitude. The future of the earth and our species may depend on its acceptance. We have reached, or are reaching, the limits of growth and the end of “cheap nature.” Benjamin Kunkel presents this grim summary:

Already for more than a generation oil companies have tended to spend ever more on exploration and production for every barrel of crude they extract, while exhaust emissions exacerbate global warming.

Global warming itself—together with soil exhaustion, aquifer depletion, the vulnerability of monocultures to invasive species, and the collapse of bee colonies—portends declining gains in agricultural productivity. Precious metals may also become scarcer and more costly. Moore [author of *Capitalism and the Web of Life*] cites a 2013 investors’ newsletter complaining of ‘deeper mines, lower-grade minerals, more remote and challenging locations’. Raw materials, fossil fuels and staple foods won’t merely grow more expensive; the mounting pollution of sky, land and water, not to mention the lost man-hours and medical costs of the consequent deterioration in human health, threatens to realize in our time the ‘transition from surplus-value to negative value’.

The answer to Emerson’s question, “To what end is nature?” must be that it is an end in itself; it is an instance of Plato’s category of things that are ends in themselves, however they may also contribute incidentally to goods beyond themselves. Nature is not created merely to serve some end beyond itself. Its value transcends commodity, though it includes it. What is it for? It simply is. The single-minded devotion of our culture to seeing nature as commodity and ourselves as an entity set outside and above or over against nature, short-sighted applications of instrumental reason to problems of production, and the dismissal of any standards of value beyond the cash nexus and the bottom line, have brought us to this pass as warned against by Frederick Engels and Aldo Leopold and summarized by Benjamin Kunkel. It is high time to incorporate into our calculations that other attitude toward nature and our place in it, the comprehensive, holistic, scientifically informed, humble and reverent attitude that embodies wisdom. If we do not do so, the costs of failure—costs to the land, the web of life, our rivers and lakes and aquifers, the very air we breathe, our future generations—will amount to a sum that absolutely cannot be calculated in monetary or any other terms known to man. And that cost is every day becoming more and more apparent, and impossible to ignore.