

Dear Reader,

This issue of the Newsletter tries to get at what underlies some of the most heated and important controversies of today. But to ferret out these assumptions requires digging deep into what may seem abstruse material from history and philosophy.

The usual way that the controversies appear in the press is a contest between the indubitable truths of science and the stubborn denial of the ignorant masses. There is plenty of this kind of standoff between enlightened people and people who either cannot understand simple facts or else are in denial of those facts. But to leave the matter there does not really get at why people seem to deny obvious facts and why the controversies are so heated.

The two leading areas of controversy today concern biology and the environment. The watchword in biological controversies is “evolution”; in environmental matters it is “climate change” (a recent substitute intended to be more ambiguous and therefore more acceptable than “global warning”). The environmental controversy is new to most people so perhaps it is just a matter of a short time before people are convinced. But there may also be a severe tension between representing humans as insignificant specks of matter and then telling them that they are responsible for destroying the planet.

The questioning of evolution has been around since the 19th century but it seems to have reemerged in recent decades after a long period of calm. Its prominence today is usually connected to the rise of the religious right in the 1970s. More important, however, is the rise of biology/biologists to the pinnacle as interpreters of human existence. People who question the idea of evolution may be expressing a skepticism that biologists should be the ultimate arbiters of the meaning of their lives.

The first essay by Gabriel Moran on the relation between nature and god is at issue in the second and third essays as well. The second essay by Nancy Abrams is excerpted from her recent book: *A God that Could Be Real: Spirituality, Science and the Future of Our Planet*. The third essay by Yuval Noah Harari is from his just published book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*.

IS NATURE OR GOD REAL?

By Gabriel Moran

The question of whether Nature or God is real may seem strange. Most people would probably say that surely nature exists but that the existence of God is debatable and uncertain. I wish to argue that nature is not real, that it does not exist. And if nature does not exist, the reality of God is the alternative although it cannot strictly be said that God exists.

As to whether nature is real, it is a simple historical fact that nature was invented by some human beings at a particular moment in the past. A group of Greek philosophers/scientists came up with the idea of nature. Nature did not correspond to any being outside the human mind but it was a useful concept for thinking abstractly about the world of living beings. The Hebrew Bible knew nothing of nature; a word for nature did not exist in ancient Hebrew. Thus, the Christian Old Testament says nothing about nature and therefore nothing about what is natural or unnatural.

St. Paul, because he was writing in Greek, assimilated the term nature into his vocabulary but he used it haphazardly. His unsystematic use of the terms natural and unnatural has been the source of unfortunate confusion in the history of Christianity and the secular culture that developed from it. Paul referred to sex between males as unnatural; he also thought that women not wearing hats in church was unnatural. Was he at least consistent in thinking that unnatural was bad? No. He thought that the church being grafted into the tree of Judaism was unnatural (and good). No term has been the source of more confusion in every era of history than the term nature.

Sadly and ironically, nature would be most useful for the idea of human nature. Humans distinguish themselves from other living beings by their nature, a stable but always changing idea. Unfortunately, "human nature" has been wielded by powerful humans against minority voices. Women, blacks, gays and numerous other groups have at times attacked the idea of human nature instead of demanding their admission to an ever expanding idea of the human.

A book in the 1930s by two great scholars, Arthur Lovejoy and Franz Boas, claimed to identify 66 meanings of the term nature; the authors said that 44 of those meanings were already present at the beginning of the Common Era. Did they get a correct count? Someone might argue that there are only 65 meanings of nature or that there are 166 meanings. But that would simply confirm that there is a hopeless confusion in the use of the term nature – and there probably always will be. What would be needed to change that situation would be to start with the admission that nature does not exist. That admission is unlikely to happen. The modern world has had a choice between nature and god as its ultimate reference point. The assumption that nature exists makes god unnecessary. If one does not assume that nature exists then one needs some other reality to underlie the discussion of all that is real.

What is ultimate about things cannot itself be a thing. That is a problem for people who are called religious, including Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist adherents. Each of these traditions when pushed to its limit ends in silence. To say that God exists is reductive, that is, it turns God into one of the beings of the world. But to say God does not exist fails to find the

ultimate in reality. The final religious attitude is silence, but a full silence that comes only at the end of speech.

The main meaning of nature in the seventeenth century was what “man” was said to dominate. Nature was whatever man had conquered or intended to conquer. However, accompanying that meaning of nature was a second meaning that went back more than two thousand years. In that tradition, nature is the mother of us all, the ultimate source of life. That meaning of nature was kept in check during the reign of Christianity when the ultimate principle was said to be a father god not a mother nature.

It was in the political revolutions in France and British America that the question was posed anew: nature or god. In the British colonies, which became the United States of America, there was an attempt to cover over the choice. Most of the intellectual class were Deists/Theists (the terms were interchangeable). The being that they called god had none of the qualities which religious people ascribe to the one whose final name is silence. Their “god” was subject to the newly discovered laws of nature which made god less than ultimate. That is clear in the Declaration of Independence which is addressed to “the laws of nature and nature’s god.”

The French were more forthright in their choice. They did not fool around saying “nature or god,” “nature’s god” or “a being called god.” Nature simply replaced the Christian idea of god. Nature is our mother; the source of our life, our being and our power. To oppose the theistic god the French thinkers posited something new called a-theism. Theism and atheism were bound together; neither has much to do with the historic religious traditions.

Theism was posited by Voltaire as an alternative to Christianity. Many people in the succeeding centuries who have called themselves atheists are more religious than most people who use “theism” as inclusive of Christianity. It is also true that many people who aggressively proclaim themselves atheists are simply ex-Christians who are angry about their early indoctrination – and have never freed themselves from it. Check the background of passionate atheists. They were usually brought up as Roman Catholic or Southern Baptist. Why do they insist so loudly on atheism? “If we know the house is empty, why ring the bell and run away?” (Mary Midgley).

In the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the idea that nature is the ultimate explanation of everything co-existed uneasily with the idea that nature is whatever is to be conquered by man. Nature was a loving mother, bestowing natural rights on man, but nature was also an evil stepmother which justified man’s overpowering of nature to produce the marvels of technology. Freud expressed the outlook of his generation in saying: “The principal task of civilization is to defend us against nature.”

What at first seems to be a breathtaking change in the dominant meaning of nature began to occur in the middle of the twentieth century and swept the field in the 1970s. It might seem to be a complete reversal in meaning: from nature as the enemy to be conquered to nature as our ultimate benefactor to be revered. The change is not as inexplicable as it might seem. Mother Nature had never died. The mother of all life emerged from the shadow of the evil stepmother. A

passage from a 1948 book by C.S. Lewis brilliantly captures what was about to occur: “Man’s conquest of Nature turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature’s conquest of Man. Every victory we seemed to win has led us, step by step, to this conclusion. All Nature’s apparent reverses have been tactical withdrawals. We thought we were beating her back when she was leading us on. What looked like hands held high in surrender was really the opening of arms to enfold us forever.”

In this quotation the capitalization of Nature and the use of the feminine pronoun for Nature are integral to the view of Man’s relation to Nature. Instead of men and women cooperating with the impersonal forces in their environment, Man is being led into Nature’s arms and she will enfold him forever. This embrace is not entirely benign. We are told to revere Nature as the Goddess who bestows on us all good things, but to do so we need to block from our minds that in the end Nature brings death to each of us. For the last half century there has been an attempt to glorify “natural death” but when most people are confronted with their own or a loved one’s death, it does not seem to be part of a loving mother’s bounty. However much we are encouraged to love and revere Nature, we still have good reason to suspect that Nature is out to kill us.

The story of “man and nature” can be exciting to study and effective at producing things which make life easier. But neither “man” nor “nature” exist in the world where individual men and women struggle with trying to make sense of their lives. Some people who have a comfortable professional job may find their science sufficient to maintain a belief in the Goddess Nature.

One of the most prominent writer who has mastered his field of study and effectively written for a popular audience is Edward O. Wilson. He has been writing on the unifying of knowledge and the understanding of human life for half a century. Now 85 years old, he recently published a book with the modest title, *The Meaning of Human Existence*. His vast knowledge of biology seems to provide him a meaning for his existence. He argues for cooperation between science and art, although science is the senior partner that provides the meaning of human existence. He is comfortable with atheism, finding it easy to demolish any arguments for the god of theism.

What is remarkable, however, is that Wilson seems not to have a glimmer of what a religious question is. He assumes that when people talk about the meaning of existence they are looking for scientific explanations of cause and effect. Questions that cross the minds of people, such as “Is there any point to all of this?” or “Why is there something rather than nothing?” might seem of interest only to professional philosophers but they are also questions that little children ask and questions that recur to an individual at life’s turning points.

The fiction that there is something called Nature is a way to avoid pesky religious questions. Nature supposedly locates us in the world of hard facts where questions have answers and disagreements can be resolved with more data. But improbable as it would seem, Man, it is said, has disrespected and wounded Nature. The claim is now made that the bounteous mother is in the process of disappearing and will soon be replaced by the evil stepmother who will teach Man that he is subject to the laws that Nature decided before this speck of matter called humanity began to strut its stuff on earth.

The project to arouse the populace to change their behavior is not going very well. Scientists are not accustomed to the role of apocalyptic doomsayer, which is a religious function. They are comfortable collecting data and connecting one dot with another. Scientists need a better story for their new mission. The problem with most scientific warnings about the coming environmental disaster is that science offers “objective” data that make Man subservient to Nature. Man has somehow been destroying the world around him and the solution is that he should go back to being an obedient player in Nature’s game.

Understanding the problem and doing something effective about environmental degradation is blocked by the assumption that Nature exists. What surely exists are men and women who interact daily with their environment. Their willingness to change their behavior depends upon their feeling a connection to their friends, children, grandchildren and landscapes. What is supposedly going to happen in a hundred years has very little interest for most people.

The eighteenth century was sure that the old time religious meaning of life could be replaced by Nature as the bounteous source of gifts. That seems to have been successful at least for a good while. But now the scientific world has unwittingly raised a religious question about whether life on earth is worthwhile and why. The contemporary scientist’s answer that we owe a respect to Nature is a religious story that is hopelessly inadequate.

The connection which people have to the passage of time, to the lives of their children and grandchildren, to their own deaths, involve a religious sensibility. The story that religions offer that involves a creator god, a centrality of human life to existence, a meaning that connects each person to an overall purpose of the world, involves fanciful myths. The story nonetheless is more compelling than the story climatologists and evolutionary biologists tell when they keep insisting that everything they say is fact while in fact the facts are embedded in the myth of Nature.

The religious institutions are not being very helpful because their religious sense gets lost in the clutter of institutional politics. Christians and Muslims throw around the word god as if “he” were their friend who listens to their prayers and supplies answers to life’s problems (Jews and Buddhists are more reticent). The greatest thinkers in all the religions have usually found at the end of their studies a mysticism of silence.

Karl Rahner, the great Catholic theologian, wrote dozens of profound theological volumes. Buried in the complex structure of his thinking are startling statements about the inadequacy of the church and the stark limits of human thinking. Like his mentor, Thomas Aquinas, Rahner was keenly aware that, despite his brilliance, at the end of all searching is a silence which most people try to avoid because it is on the edge of the abyss of nothingness. “A Christian,” wrote Rahner, “cannot enter God as an obvious item in the balance sheet of life; he can only accept him as an incomprehensible mystery in silence and adoration.” More generally, Rahner described religion as “the conviction that it is meaningful for a mere human to speak into the endless desert of God’s silence.” Unless the environmental movement can tap into that attitude, and to a story with humans rather than Nature at its center, their preaching of coming doom will not succeed.

A GOD THAT COULD BE REAL

By Nancy Abrams

For most of my life, a God that was real seemed a contradiction in terms. Every idea of God I had ever encountered seemed either physically impossible or so vague as to be empty. But a time came when I needed a higher power. I was forced to acknowledge that, but I didn't know if it would be possible for me. I have no interest in a God that has to be believed in. If I am going to have God in my life, it has to be a God that can't help but exist, in the same way that matter and gravity and culture exist. We don't need to believe in these things; they just exist. We can choose to learn more about them, or not.

For me a God that is real has to be real not in our commonsense world but in the double dark universe, where we now know we live. The double dark theory tells a big piece of our origin story. For thousands of years and in virtually all cultures, people have told origin stories, but this is the first one to be based on science and therefore the first origin story in the history of humanity that may actually be accurate. The story is not what anyone expected. We're living in a stranger universe than earlier generation ever dreamed. The implications of this discovery for intelligent beings are almost entirely unknown, but inevitably they will be life changing. We have a new picture of the universe. What does a new picture of our universe mean for who and what we are? And what does it mean for God?

The modern world is certainly confused about God. Surveys consistently find that about 90% of Americans, and a somewhat smaller majority of people in other countries, say quite definitely that they believe in God. But when they are asked to explain what they mean by *God*, they become less certain, and there's much divergence of opinion. Is God something authoritarian or supportive, engaged or distant, physical or in the heart? Some describe God as all knowing, all loving, all wise, a careful planner – an entity embodying human characteristics raised to perfection – that created and controls the entire universe, including alien worlds where there could be intelligent creatures with little resemblance to humans.

Religion's opponents jump in and claim that God does not exist, end of story. This claim is understandable: abuses in the name of religion provide plenty of temptation to feel that the human race might be better off abolishing the whole idea of religion. From this perspective God is at best a fantasy and a distraction, and there are more useful ways to contribute to society.

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, I majored in the history and philosophy of science. I studied physics historically, from Thales and Aristotle to Einstein, and was convinced that, though paradigms changed, our best chance at truth is through the scientific method. But I also attended lectures by the legendary mythologist and historian of religion Mircea Eliade – if I was lucky enough to hear about them, because he followed no schedule. Eliade was always disappearing for weeks or months, rumor held, to be initiated into the secret shamanic rites of some exotic culture. With his penetrating eyes and ever-present pipe, he was the most intriguing person I had ever met. He seemed to have access to a level of intense existence I had never experienced or even known about. Nor as far as I could tell, had anyone I

had ever encountered in my suburban life. How could his word mesh with the quantum mechanics I was also studying? College gave me my overriding purpose in life to try to see the big picture – not only the universe and the history of how humans have come to know it but also the deep invisible possibilities of the human, including me.

One day it hit me. I didn't have to work from some prepackaged idea of "God" and ask if that could exist. The Question "Does God exist?" is a hopeless distraction that will never lead anywhere positive. I had to turn the fundamental question on its head. If I wanted to find a God that is real, I had to start from what is real, what actually exists. I realized that the question that matters is this: Could anything actually exist in the universe, as science understands it, that is worthy of being called God?

If the answer to my question is yes, then this is a huge discovery. It means that those of us who feel conflicted or even intellectually dismissive about a traditional kind of God, but who long for some spiritual connection, can enjoy the benefits of a genuinely higher power in our lives, open-heartedly. This shift in approach was like waking from a dream. Suddenly coherence became possible, because from a cosmic perspective the answer to my question became *yes*. There is something that truly fulfills the need for God and is also consistent with a cutting-edge scientific outlook. If we give this idea a serious chance – if we can tamp down the usual reflex of resistance – this way of thinking about God can be comforting, awe-inspiring, empowering, and in harmony with science.

THE WORSHIP OF MAN

By Yuval Harari

The last 300 years are often depicted as an age of growing secularism, in which religions have increasingly lost their importance. If we are talking about theist religions, this is largely correct. But if we take into consideration natural-law religions, then modernity turns out to be an age of intense religious fervor, unparalleled missionary efforts, and the bloodiest wars of religion in history. The modern age has witnessed the rise of a number of new natural-law religions, such as liberalism, Communism, capitalism, nationalism and Nazism. If a religion is a system of human norms and values that is founded in belief in a superhuman order, then Soviet Communism was no less a religion than Islam.

Islam is of course different from Communism because Islam sees the superhuman order governing the world as the edict of an omnipotent creator god, whereas Soviet Communism did not believe in gods. But Buddhism too gives short shrift to gods, and yet we commonly classify it as a religion. Like Buddhists, Communists believed in a superhuman order of natural and immutable laws that should guide human actions. Whereas Buddhists believe that the law of nature was discovered by Siddhartha Gautama, Communists believed that the law of nature was discovered by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin. The similarity does not end there. Like other religions, Communism too has its holy scripture, such as Marx's *Das Kapital*, which foretold that history would soon end with the inevitable victory of the proletariat.

We can divide creeds into god-centered religions and godless ideologies that claim to be based on natural laws. We should note that belief in gods persists within many modern ideologies, and that some of them, most notably liberalism, make little sense without this belief. Humanist religions worship humanity, or more correctly, *Homo sapiens*. Humanism is a belief that *Homo sapiens* has a unique and sacred nature, which is fundamentally different from the nature of all other animals and of all other phenomena. Humanists believe that the unique nature of *Homo sapiens* is the most important thing in the world, and it determines the meaning of everything that happens in the universe. The supreme good is the good of *Homo sapiens*. The rest of the world and all other beings exist solely for the benefit of this species.

Today the most important humanist sect is liberal humanism which believes that “humanity” is a quality of individual humans, and that the liberty of individuals is sacrosanct. According to liberals, the sacred nature of humanity resides within each and every individual *Homo sapiens*. The inner core of individual humans gives meaning to the world, and is the source of all ethical and political authority. If we encounter an ethical or political dilemma, we should look inside and listen to our inner voice – the voice of humanity. The chief commandments of liberal humanism are meant to protect the liberty of this inner voice against intrusions or harm.

Even though liberal humanism sanctifies humans, it does not deny the existence of God, and is, in fact, founded on monotheist beliefs. The liberal belief in the free and sacred nature of each individual is a direct legacy of the traditional Christian belief in free and eternal individual souls. Without recourse to eternal souls and a Creator God, it becomes embarrassingly difficult for liberals to explain what is so special about individual Sapiens.

At the dawn of the third millennium, the future of evolutionary humanism is unclear. For sixty years after the end of war against Hitler it was taboo to link humanism with evolution and to advocate using biological methods to “upgrade” *Homo sapiens*. But today such projects are back in vogue. No one speaks about exterminating lower races or inferior people, but many contemplate using our increasing knowledge of human biology to create superhumans.

At the same time, a huge gap is opening between the tenets of liberal humanism and the latest findings of the life sciences, a gulf we cannot ignore much longer. Our liberal political and judicial systems are founded on the belief that every individual has a sacred inner nature, indivisible and immutable, which gives meaning to the world, and which is the source of all political and ethical authority. This is a reincarnation of the traditional Christian belief in a free and eternal soul that resides within each individual.

Yet over the last 200 years, the life sciences have thoroughly undermined this belief. Scientists studying the inner working of the human organism have found no soul there. They increasingly argue that human behavior is determined by hormones, genes and synapses, rather than by free will – the same forces that determine the behavior of chimpanzees, wolves and ants. Our judicial and political systems largely try to sweep such inconvenient discoveries under the carpet. But in all frankness, how long can we maintain the wall separating the department of biology from the departments of law and political science?