

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, as was long hair on men. 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.

There is irony in the fact that “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 possibly 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 that 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. As Nietzsche pointed out theism and atheism were part of the same system; both were unmasked by the end of the nineteenth century. But theism/atheism has little to do with the historic religious traditions.

Theism was posited by Voltaire as an alternative to Christianity. Some people who call themselves atheists are more religious than people who use “theism” to include 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? As Mary Midgley wrote of atheism: “If we know the house is empty, why ring the bell and run away?”

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 our enemy for conquest to nature as our ultimate benefactor. 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 writers 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 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 exist 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, their children and grandchildren and their 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 some 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 the center, their preaching of coming doom will not succeed