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THE DISCOURSES OF NATURE

In its commonest and most fundamental sense, the term 'nature' refers to everything which is not human and distinguished from the work of humanity.¹ Thus 'nature' is opposed to culture, to history, to convention, to what is artificially worked or produced, in short, to everything which is defining of the order of humanity. I speak of this conception of nature as 'otherness' to humanity as fundamental because, although many would question whether we can in fact draw any such rigid divide, the conceptual distinction remains indispensable. Whether, for example, it is claimed that 'nature' and 'culture' are clearly differentiated realms or that no hard and fast delineation can be made between them, all such thinking is tacitly reliant on the humanity-nature antithesis itself and would have no purchase on our understanding without it. The implications of this are not always as fully appreciated as they might be either by those who would have us view 'nature' as a variable and relative construct of human discourse or by those who emphasize human communality with the 'rest of nature', and I shall have more to say on this in the following chapter. Suffice it to note here that an *a priori* discrimination between humanity and 'nature' is implicit in all discussions of the relations between the two, and thus far it is correct to insist that 'nature' is

the idea through which we conceptualize what is 'other' to ourselves.

But for the most part, when 'nature' is used of the non-human, it is in a rather more concrete sense to refer to that part of the environment which we have had no hand in creating. It is used empirically to mark off that part of the material world that is given prior to any human activity, from that which is humanly shaped or contrived. This is the sort of distinction which John Passmore makes central to his work on *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, where he writes he will be using the word 'nature'

so as to include only that which, setting aside the supernatural, is human neither in itself nor in its origins. This is the sense in which neither Sir Christopher Wren nor St Paul's Cathedral forms part of 'nature' and it may be hard to decide whether an oddly shaped flint or a landscape where the trees are evenly spaced is or is not 'natural'.²

Passmore himself admits that this is to use the term in one of its narrower senses; yet it is also, I think, to use it in the sense which corresponds most closely to ordinary intuitions about its essential meaning. The idea of 'nature' as that which we are not, which we are external to, which ceases to be fully 'natural' once we have mixed our labour with it, or which we have destroyed by our interventions, also propels a great deal of thought and writing about 'getting back' to nature, or rescuing it from its human corruption. Ecological writing, for example, very frequently works implicitly with an idea of nature as a kind of pristine otherness to human culture, whose value is depreciated proportionately to its human admixture, and this is an idea promoted by Robert Goodin, in his attempt to supply a 'green theory of value'. What is crucial to a 'green theory of value', argues Goodin, is that it accords value to what is created by natural processes rather than by artificial human ones; and he employs the analogy

with fakes and forgeries in art to argue that replications of the environment by developers, even if absolutely exact, will never be the same, or have the same value, precisely because they will not be independent of human process:

... a restored bit of nature is necessarily not as valuable as something similar that has been 'untouched by human hands'. Even if we simply stand back and 'let nature take its course' once again, and even if after several decades most of what we see is the handiwork of nature rather than of humanity, there will almost inevitably still be human residues in its final product. Even if we subsequently 'let nature take its course', *which* course it has taken will typically have been dictated by that human intervention in the causal history. To the extent that that is true, even things that are largely the product of natural regeneration are still to some (perhaps significant) degree the product of human handiwork. And they are, on the green theory of value, that much less valuable for being so.³

But persuasive as these approaches may seem, in some ways, there are a number of reasons to question their tendency to elide 'nature' defined as that 'which is human neither in itself nor its origins' with 'nature' defined as that part of the environment which is humanly unaffected. Much, after all, that is 'natural' in the first sense is also affected by us, including, one may argue, the building materials which have gone into the making of St Paul's Cathedral. On the other hand, if 'nature' is identified with that part of the environment that is humanly unaffected, then, as Passmore rightly notes, it is being defined in such a way as to leave us uncertain of its empirical application, at least in respect of the sort of examples he gives: the oddly shaped flint, the landscape where the trees are straight, and so on. The fact that we may not be able concretely to determine what is or is not 'natural' in this sense is no objection, of course,

to its conceptualization as that which is unaffected by human hand; but when we consider how much of our environment we most certainly know *not* to be 'natural' in this sense, and how much of the remainder we may be rather doubtful about, we may feel that the conceptual distinction, though logically clear enough, has lost touch with the more ordinary discriminations we make through the idea of 'nature' – as between the built and unbuilt environment, the 'natural' and the 'artificial' colouring, the 'Nature' park and the opera house, and so forth.

If we consider, that is, the force of Marx's remark that: 'the nature which preceded human history no longer exists anywhere (except perhaps on a few Australian coral-islands of recent origin)';⁴ and if we then consider the human 'contamination' to which these possible 'exceptions' have been subject since he wrote, then it is difficult not to feel that in thinking of 'nature' as that which is utterly unaffected by human dealings, we are thinking of a kind of being to which rather little on the planet in reality corresponds. Now this, it might be said, is precisely the force of so construing it, namely that it brings so clearly into view its actual disappearance; the extent, that is, to which humanity has destroyed, nay obliterated, 'nature' as a result of its occupation of the planet. This certainly seems to be the kind of prescriptive force that Goodin, and some of those associated with a 'deep ecology' approach, would wish to draw from it, insofar as they present human beings as always desecrating nature howsoever they intervene in it.⁵

But to press this kind of case is inevitably to pose some new conceptual problems. For it is to present humanity as in its very being opposed to nature, and as necessarily destroying, or distraining on its value, even in the most minimal pursuit of its most 'natural' needs. Since merely to walk in 'nature', to pluck the berry, to drink the mountain

stream, is, on this theory of value, necessarily to devalue it, the logical conclusion would seem to be that it would have been better by far had the species never existed. But, at this point, we might begin to wonder why the same argument could not apply to other living creatures, albeit they are said, unlike ourselves, to belong to nature, since they, too, make use of its resources, destroy each other, and in that sense corrupt its pristine paradise. In other words, we may ask what it is exactly that makes a human interaction with 'nature' intrinsically devaluing, where that of other species is deemed to be unproblematic – of the order of nature itself. If humanity is thought to be an intrusion upon this 'natural' order, then it is unclear why other creatures should not count as 'intrusions' also, and inanimate 'nature' hence as better off without them. We may begin to wonder what it is exactly that renders even the most primitive of human dwellings an 'artificial' excrescence, but allows the bee-hive or ant-heap to count as part of nature; or, conversely, whether the humanity-nature relationship is not here being conceived along lines that might logically require us to question the 'naturalness' of species other than our own. Or to put the point in more political terms: we may suspect that this is an approach to the 'value' of nature that is too inclined to abstract from the impact on the environment of the different historical modes of 'human' interaction with it, and thus to mislocate the source of the problem – which arguably resides not in any inherently 'devaluing' aspect of human activity, but in the specific forms it has taken.

But rather than pursue these issues further here, let me return to the point I earlier raised concerning ordinary parlance about 'nature'. For there is no doubt that any definition of nature as that untouched by human hand is belied by some of the commonest uses of the term. In other words, if we count as 'nature' only that which

preceded human history, or is free from the impact of human occupancy of the planet, then it might seem as if we were committed to denying the validity of much of our everyday reference to 'nature'. To speak of the 'nature walk' or 'Nature Park'; of 'natural' as opposed to 'artificial' additives; of the 'natural' environment which we love and seek to preserve – all this, it might follow from this approach, is a muddle; and a muddle, it might be further argued, that we ought to seek to correct through an adjustment of language. But tempting as it might seem, in view of the conceptual imprecision of ordinary talk of 'nature', to want to police the term in this way, there are a number of reasons to resist the move. In the first place, talk of the countryside and its 'natural' flora and fauna may be loose, but it still makes discriminations that we would want to observe between different types of space and human uses of it. If ordinary discourse lacks rigour in referring to woodland or fields, the cattle grazing upon them, and so forth, as 'nature', it is still marking an important distinction between the urban and industrial environment. As we shall see in chapter 6, the criteria employed in such distinctions may be difficult to specify, but the distinctions are not of a kind that we can readily dispense with, or that a more stringent use of terminology can necessarily capture more adequately. Or to put the point in more Wittgensteinian terms, it may be a mistaken approach to the meaning of terms to attempt to specify *how* they should be employed as opposed to exploring the *way* in which they are actually used. The philosopher's task, suggested Wittgenstein, was not to prescribe the use of terms in the light of some supposedly 'strict' or essential meaning, but to observe their usage in 'ordinary' language itself; and it is certainly in that spirit that much of my pursuit here of the 'meaning' of nature will be conducted, even if that only serves to expose its theoretical laxity relative to any

particular definition we might insist it ought to have. Indeed, there is perhaps something inherently mistaken in the attempt to define what nature is, independently of how it is thought about, talked about and culturally represented. There can be no adequate attempt, that is, to explore 'what nature is' that is not centrally concerned with what it has been *said* to be, however much we might want to challenge that discourse in the light of our theoretical rulings.

Cosmological 'Nature'

These, then, are some of the reasons for questioning the adequacy of any attempt to conceptualize 'nature', even when we are thinking primarily only of the 'natural' environment, as that which is wholly extraneous to, and independent of, human process. Moreover, of course, we do not simply use the term 'nature' to refer to an 'external' spatial domain, from which we and our works are clearly delineated. We also use it in reference to that totality of being of which we in some sense conceive ourselves as forming a part. We have thought, that is, of humanity as being a component of nature even as we have conceptualized nature as absolute otherness to humanity. 'Nature' is in this sense both that which we are not *and* that which we are within.

When the order of 'Nature', for example, was conceived as a Great Chain of Being, as it was in the physico-theology which prevailed from the early Middle Ages through to the late eighteenth century,⁶ humanity was thought of very definitely as occupying a place within it, and a rather middling one at that. Based on the Neoplatonist principles of plenitude (the impossibility of a vacuum or 'gap' in being), hierarchy and continuity, the Great Chain of Being perceived the universe as:

composed of an immense, or – by the strict if seldom rigorously applied logic of the principle of continuity – of an infinite, number of links ranging in hierarchical order from the meagerest kind of existents, which barely escape non-existence, through ‘every possible’ grade up to the *ens perfectissimum* – or, in a somewhat more orthodox version, to the highest possible kind of creature, between which and the Absolute Being the disparity was assumed to be infinite – every one of them differing from that immediately above and that immediately below it by the ‘least possible’ degree of difference.⁷

Or, as Pope expressed it in his *Essay on Man*:

Vast Chain of being! which from God began,
Natures aethereal, human, angel, man,
Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see,
No glass can reach; – On superior pow’rs
Were we to press, inferior might on ours;
Or in the full creation leave a void,
Where, one step broken, the great scale’s destroy’d;
From Nature’s chain whatever link you strike,
Tenth, or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike.⁸

Pope in the eighteenth century is emphasizing the coherence of the ‘natural’ cosmos and chaos that would ensue from breaking its ‘chain’, where as the stress of Mediaeval thought was on the creative and generative power of God’s love in divinely willing the fullest of universes.⁹ But the essential idea that humanity is within this order of ‘Nature’, and indeed occupies a fairly modest rung in its hierarchy of being, remains common to both. Humanity is thought of as infinitely inferior to the deity, but also to all those aethereal spirits, angels, possibly more sublime mortals elsewhere in the universe, who people the myriad degrees of difference within the abyss which yawns between man and God. When ‘Nature’, then, is conceived in cosmological terms as the totality of being, humanity is

neither opposed to it nor viewed as separable from it. This is not to deny that there is much in the conception of the Chain that directly encouraged the idea of human lordship over the rest of animal (and vegetable) life. The teleological purposes it attributed to a deity, who had so designed all things and laws of nature as to place them at the service of his human servant, were frequently used to justify a dominion over all those creatures below us in the Chain, and an instrumental use of earthly resources. In the words of a key text of Scholastic philosophy: 'As man is made for the sake of God, namely, that he may serve him, so is the world made for the sake of man, that it may serve him',¹⁰ and this was echoed in many other expressions of a similar complacency over the ensuing centuries. The increasingly ingenious and anthropocentric use of Christian doctrine by English preachers and commentators prior to the Reformation to support an instrumental use of nature has been charted by Keith Thomas, who concludes his survey by suggesting that 'a reader who came fresh to the moral and theological writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could be forgiven for inferring that their main purpose was to define the special status of man and to justify his rule over other creatures'.¹¹ In this sense, the idea of the Chain supported those currents of Enlightenment thought which emphasized our difference from, and right to exploit, 'nature', and operated as a kind of theological complement to their secular and temporalized teleology.

All the same, we should note that when conceived as a way of considering the question of 'Man's place in Nature', the cosmology of the Great Chain of Being can by no means be viewed as supplying a straightforwardly anthropocentric answer, and this is particularly true of the inflections it acquired in the age of Enlightenment itself. Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz had all agreed to the principle that *non omnia hominum causa fieri* ['not everything is created for human ends'],¹² and Locke, Kant, Addison,

theology

Bolingbroke, and many others, were to invoke the idea of the Chain as a reminder of the numerous creatures superior to man, and as a caution against arrogant assumptions of human dominance within 'Nature'. Addison wrote, for example, that the difference of species 'appears, in many instances, small, and would probably appear still less, if we had means of knowing their motives'. Thus, if under one aspect man is associated with the angels and archangels, under another he must 'say to Corruption, Thou art my Father, and to the worm, Thou art my sister'.¹³ In similar vein, Bolingbroke argued that superior as man was, he was nonetheless:

... connected by his nature, and therefore, by the design of the Author of all Nature, with the whole tribe of animals, and so closely with some of them, that the distance between his intellectual faculties and theirs, which constitutes as really, though not so sensibly as figure, the difference of species, appears, in many instances, small, and would probably appear still less, if we had the means of knowing their motives, as we have of observing their actions.¹⁴

We may say, then, that, although the Promethean assumptions of human separation from and superiority over 'Nature' do eventually triumph over the idea of our 'middling' rank within its overall cosmology, they were nonetheless continually countered by less confident assumptions, deriving from the Mediaeval theology, about humanity's place within this order. Worth noting, moreover, in this connection are the quite striking similarities between the contemporary ecological emphases on humanity's continuity with nature and place 'within' it, and those of the Great Chain of Being. Of course, there can be no direct analogue between a secular critique of instrumental rationality and of a 'technical fix' approach to nature, and a Neoplatonist theology

which grounds its demand for human humility in the distance which separates man from the lowliest of divine beings. Ecology, moreover, is generally opposed to the hierarchical ranking of species that is the organizing principle of the Great Chain. But if we extrapolate the cosmological principles from their theological trappings, and focus simply on the idea of plenitude, diversity and organic interconnection informing the idea of the Chain, then there would at least seem some parallel here with current arguments concerning the interdependency of the eco-system, the importance of maintaining bio-diversity, and the unpredictable consequences of any, however seemingly insignificant, subtraction from it. Moreover, there is no doubt that, in a general way, ecology would have us revise our attitudes to 'nature' and the place of humanity within it, along lines that would reintroduce some of the conception of the Chain; rather than view 'nature' as an external and inorganic context, we should regard the eco-system as a plurality of beings each possessed of its particular function and purpose in maintaining the whole.

Human 'Nature'

The limitations of thinking of 'nature' as that which is independent of us, and external to us, are also brought into view when we consider the way in which we use the term in reference to ourselves. For we, too, it is said, are possessed of a 'nature', and may behave in more or less 'natural' ways. Now, it might be argued, that all that we should read into this vocabulary is the idea that human beings possess properties which are of their 'essence', with no presumption being made about their 'naturalness' in any other sense. In other words, in speaking of 'human nature' we are not necessarily implying that human beings par-