

# Doing away with the concept of Nature, back to ethics and politics

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All that is natural is good, we say<sup>1</sup>. Nature is harmony and order, where everything has its place and must not be disturbed. It inspires a religious sentiment of respect, in the sense of adoration and fear (and submission to whatever we perceive as powerful and dangerous).

If everything which exists is nature, then nothing can be contra-natural. If, in contrast, only part of what exists is nature, then “contra-natural” only has any sense if we also accept that this nature has a purpose. There is, however, nothing to support this view. Science at any rate, since Darwin, has remained silent on this point<sup>2</sup>. Only faith, whether faith in the natural order or religious faith, continues to advocate the existence of such a purpose. Furthermore, that an entity, “Nature”, should exist and have a purpose cannot in itself resolve the ethical problem: that Nature (or God) exists does not automatically mean we must surrender to its (or His) will.

To show “respect” for what we perceive as powerful, and to submit to an order (even when disguised as a “desire for harmony”) does not, in itself, bode well. And yet the idea of nature is omnipresent in normative messages. Reality is not so clear-cut. On the one hand humans cry out in indignation against what they consider to be contra-natural; on the other they praise the conquests that have enabled humanity to escape the difficulties of its primitive condition. No-one really wants us to slavishly imitate nature, yet no-one is willing to abandon the idea that Nature should serve as an example or model. All too often, ideas about what is contra-natural and what is natural (taken to mean normal, healthy, good, etc.) overshadow the question of what constitutes right and wrong, of what is desirable and why, according to which criteria. The idea of nature “pollutes” moral and political debate.

## Reverence for natural order

Value judgements draw heavily on references to Nature. In advertising, “natural” serves to describe or suggest all manner of positively-connoted concepts: countryside, health, tradition, eternity, force, authenticity, wisdom, simplicity, peace, splendour, abundance... The image of nature adds some much-needed “soul” to the material world. It helps “re-enchant” the capitalist context. When it comes to selling, everything can be natural.

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<sup>1</sup> This article borrows passages – with the author’s permission – from Estiva Reus’ introduction to *La Nature* by John Stuart Mill (La Découverte, 2003). Mill’s essay, first published in 1874 under the title *On Nature*, puts forward a remarkable critical analysis of the doctrines which “make Nature a test of right and wrong, good and evil, or which in any mode or degree attach merit or approval to following, imitating or obeying Nature.” More generally, the analyses developed herein owe much to current trains of thought within the movement for animal equality.

<sup>2</sup> See the collective work *Espèces et éthique. Darwin, une (r)évolution à venir* (Tahin Party, 2001). Much of the biology, ecology and evolutionary theory taught in schools, summarised in general-interest and science magazines, and debated on television and radio make ample reference to naturalist, finalist and holist theories.

As an ideology, “respect for nature” is gaining ground over the domination of nature, even though they are two sides of the same coin. Scientific and technological “advancements” are almost always welcomed as stages in the Long March towards Progress, yet at the same time we hear constant doomsaying about the risks of playing “sorcerer’s apprentice.” In both instances we refer to myths (Progress versus “Man as demiurge”) more than we consider the positive or negative consequences for those involved. The balance between these two attitudes appears to be quite random: today, genetics and biotechnologies are prime targets of the “pro-nature” reflex, especially when human reproduction is involved. Other medical innovations are labelled progress without a moment’s hesitation. This distinction is based partly on the consequences we believe they might have. But is this enough to explain why helping a couple have a child through IVF raises “serious ethical issues,” to use the standard phrase, when treating certain causes of sterility prior to conception does not? It is as though some areas have been deemed sacred: nature has provided specific means of reproduction and failure to respect this will be severely punished.

Similar reactions can arise in the most diverse fields: the fear prompted by some new threat or other rekindles the idea that Nature commands and punishes. Concern that bovine spongiform encephalopathy could be transmitted to humans led some observers to lay the blame on the fact that herbivores had been fed animal flour<sup>3</sup>.

We are witnessing the emergence of a laicised form of religious thinking where the word Nature has replaced the word God. It underpins messages in which respect for natural equilibrium is presented as a value in itself. Equilibrium, in its original meaning, is a purely descriptive term referring to a state of immobility or permanence: the links between the different elements in an ecosystem are such that it conserves its structure; the component beings are either constant or identically renewed<sup>4</sup>. In common parlance, however, rather than referring to this specific state of rest as opposed to movement, “equilibrium” has taken on the sense of an ideal state. The equilibrium of ecosystems has become an “order of nature” or a “natural harmony.” The concept of order suggests a system in which each being or category of beings has its rightful place. That of harmony evokes a state of union or concord in which the different elements interrelate so as to contribute to the beauty of the whole<sup>5</sup>. These words conjure up an image of Nature that creates order in the world for the good of its creatures while reminding us of the danger in store should we disturb this perfection.

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<sup>3</sup> In contrast, neither public opinion nor ethical committees have been moved by routine artificial insemination on the same cows. Who cares about what the cows are subjected to?

<sup>4</sup> Despite its success in general-public environmental theories, natural equilibrium probably does not exist. Cf. Daniel Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies, A New Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that the notion of “natural order” is contemporary with explicitly authoritarian political and social regimes, while that of “natural equilibriums” is more contemporary with parliamentary democracies. Often, our vision of nature has shown itself to be a mirror-image of how we live as a society. It is worrying then to see that we have conserved a totalitarian vision of nature in which individuals exist only as cogs and functions within a totalising order.

Inasmuch as belief is hard to formalise, the word “mystique” appears more immediately appropriate when discussing nature than “religion.” It has permeated all social interaction to become the backdrop of our existence. Those who refer explicitly to nature as a system voice a form of religiosity distinct from traditional religions in that it is perfectly in tune with modern society: an individual yet shared religiosity, common but not collective. A widespread mystique elaborated by dispersed individuals and most of the time celebrated individually, in the privacy of the mind – in complete *laicism*.

This mystique is in fine form: for much of the population, manmade creations and human activity are either “natural” (good, original, authentic...) or “artificial” (degenerate, denatured, bad...). While some worship at “organisations for the protection of nature” and “health food” stores (banishing medication, pills, chemistry and concrete), there are far more non-practicing believers. Many people experience the current ecological crisis in naturalist terms: taken as a biological group, our very species raises issues; humanity is damned and it is in its essence to “destroy nature.” Approaching very real problems this way skirts the issue of social relations (which is why nature is invoked) and makes it impossible to reach concrete, political solutions. Yet clearly not all humans or activities weigh as heavily on our environment and our lives... As for the belief that the so-called “indigenous” peoples, the ones who are supposedly “close to nature” (why not go back to the good old colonial days and call them “primitive” or “natural”?) can help us by imparting “original wisdom”, surely it would be more useful to put questions of human relations, exploitation, capitalism, patriarchy, etc. back on the agenda?

We do not see nature (reality) as a form of harmony, nor as a model, nor as handing out timely punishments. We could list nature’s misdeeds towards humans and other animals. We could list attempts to offset the harm it causes with the benefits it supposedly provides; attempts we can ascribe to theologians’ desperate efforts to show that Creation, because it is the work of God, can only be good. The fact is, *we do not believe that Nature exists*, that this is an orderly, balanced, harmonious world in which everything has its natural place. Nor do we believe in the nature of things. The notion of “reality” suffices; it is descriptive whereas “nature” is prescriptive. One can imagine “contra-natural” acts but “contra-real” acts? Reality can be neither violated nor transgressed. Free from religious fear, we can consider what it is right or wrong to do.

## Nature and ethics: the leap from “what is” to “what should be”

We gladly tell ourselves that things have an essence and that this essence makes them what they are, that it gives them one property rather than another. We tell

ourselves that everything has a specific “nature” which determines its characteristics, growth and future, ensures it stays in its assigned place in “the order of things” and fulfils its role. “Mother Nature” is said to give each so-called natural element its nature, to which we attribute a purpose. All the beings that belong to a category “of the same nature” exist *for* a reason or are *destined* to behave in a certain way. Only by fulfilling this *raison d’être* can they accomplish their true nature. A cat is supposed to accomplish its nature as a feline or carnivore. If it fails to conform to this nature it will be seen as “degenerate.”

Essences are essential and must not be touched. Hence we must not mix things whose essence (nature) we take to be different. This is the reflex behind the hatred of mixed ethnicity. By “altering” the nature of things, we risk seeing the order this nature maintains dissolve into chaos. This mythological belief condemns biotechnologies because they create *chimera*, because they blur the fantastical natural boundaries between species or, in the case of human cloning, because they are thought to violate a sacrosanct uniqueness<sup>6</sup>. Once again the question isn’t whether the consequences of our acts are natural or artificial, whether they “violate the laws of nature” (transgress the so-called “natural” boundary between species), but to determine whether these acts are harmful or dangerous, and for whom. Presenting the problem in terms of an artificial, industrial, modern, bad science versus a natural, human, traditional, good wisdom prevents (or avoids) reasoning on the basis of rational criteria. With respect to new technologies in particular, this often detracts attention from a fundamental political problem: populations *do not* determine their future (today we could even say the world’s future) nor the means to be implemented. A similar criticism can be aimed at “organic” farming which, despite its good intentions, ultimately focuses public attention more on the *credo* “natural is good” and less on the ethical and political questions of production and distribution, sustainable growth and the sharing of wealth.

By assigning a nature to beings, we assert a right or a purpose or a duty in the most arbitrary manner possible. That women *can* have children led to the idea that they *must* have children, or that motherhood was the only possible way for a woman to realise her true nature. That male and female sex organs *make possible* procreation has been interpreted as a commandment from nature (or God) *demanding* that they serve only this purpose<sup>7</sup>. In contrast, that the mouth should be a means of ingesting food has never prompted moralisers to disapprove those who use their mouth to blow into a clarinet. Nature is the norm.

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<sup>6</sup> For a critical analysis of the implications of humanist opposition to human cloning, cf. David Olivier, “Alors, on pourra les manger” in *Les Cahiers antispécistes* n°15.

<sup>7</sup> With respect to homosexual relations, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Part 3, Section 2, Chapter 2, Article 6) states that, “Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.” They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.”

More often than not, that which is perceived as natural is that which is considered usual or acceptable by a given society, and in particular by its dominant elements. When it isn't by divine right it is a fact of nature that adults have a duty to rule children's lives and men to rule women's lives, that Whites have a duty to "civilise" Blacks or other "races", that humans reign over other "species", and so on. It is in the nature of the dominated and the dominant to be as they are<sup>8</sup>. It's a tough message and a powerful one. Once again, invoking Nature avoids a reasoned *discussion* of our values and the ensuing choices. There is nothing left to debate. The choices have been made.

## Nature and intra-human discrimination

Take the notion of race: the problem isn't that we've distinguished between different varieties of human (ones with black skin, ones with white skin, ones with narrow eyes, fair hair, dark hair and so on). The problem is to have "naturalised" certain of these classifications (those with political implications). "Black skin" became the sign of a race, race being a type of *nature*. Henceforth, black skin was no longer a characteristic among many but an *essence*, a sign of belonging to an all-encompassing category. Henceforth the individual *belongs* to and is entirely defined by a class. He becomes a representative. He no longer *has* black skin, he *is* Black. Stripped of all individuality, he is a *specimen* and an expression of his category. Of course this applies above all to the dominated: if Blacks are *essentially* Black, then Whites are White, yes, but cannot be reduced to the colour of their skin.

The same is true of the sexes. It is no longer one of my characteristics to *have* one or other sex: I *am* that sex. My sex is supposed to say everything about what I am. This is all the more true for women. *Tota mulier in utero*: woman is a womb. Men, on the contrary, are fully human; they embody the species, universality, whereas women are specific, particular, *different*.

Similarly, children are children and their reactions are perceived only as those of children rather than expressions by individuals. Adults *are* fully human and individual. They are the norm...

Regrettably, many anti-racists and anti-sexists refuse to do away with the idea of nature and simply try to undermine the categories of sex and race by blurring their contours. This tactic is especially evident with respect to racism when resumed in the formula "there is only one race and that is the human race." Regarding sexism,

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<sup>8</sup> The dominant believe they have emerged from nature, thanks to their individual qualities (unlike the dominated whom they imagine remain voluntarily immersed in nature) *except* when seeking to legitimate their dominant position. For example, they become "natural men" (males) with irrepressible needs when seeking to justify rape, cf. D. Welzer-Lang, *Le viol au masculin* (L'Harmattan, 1988) or carnivorous by nature when justifying their consumption of meat, cf. Clémentine Guyard, *Dame Nature est mythe*, (Carobella Ex-Natura, 2002). On nature and appropriation within society, cf. Colette Guillaumin, *Sexe, Race et Pratique du pouvoir. L'idée de Nature* (Indigo & Côté-femmes, 2000) [1978].

the equivalent affirmation that “there are no sexes” would be too blunt. Instead, we are frequently told that “there is masculine and feminine in each of us.” Both these principles can be argued without having to question two fundamental characteristics of the “naturalist” approach: the transformation of individuals into beings who carry the *essence* of their category, and the justification of the ethical status of this group’s members by the natural properties by which they are supposedly defined. The prevailing opinion *wants* to go on seeking justification in nature’s intentions, to accept the moral relevance of “natural” limits.

## Nature and speciesism<sup>9</sup>

There is one area where the only explanation for the majority view is belief in these two postulates, even though its proponents are rarely aware of this. This area is the definition of the beings we must care about (“moral patients”). Whom should we “not kill”, “not make suffer”, “not treat as a simple means to an end”? The usual answer is “human beings” when logically it should be “all those who could suffer from this behaviour.” There are few areas in which a “natural difference” — in this case species<sup>10</sup> — is used with so little precaution as a moral frontier. For those that fall outside this definition, we accept to equate what is good for them with “what nature has provided for them” and, where necessary, to assimilate it with what they can do for us: cats are meant to catch mice, sheep are meant to be sheared, chickens are meant to be roasted.

Does any natural characteristic (or characteristics) clearly justify that we should dismiss the interests of sensitive beings as long as these beings are not human<sup>11</sup>? Simply asking the question is often considered sacrilegious. And yet it is hard to find a characteristic that is *exclusively* human and common to all humans. Not all humans share the distinctive features generally advanced in response to this question. They characterise a *typical human*, a human nature we have invented for this purpose and which corresponds to an adult human in good mental health. The very definition of “human” is vague. Are foetuses human? What about spermatozoids and ovules? What

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<sup>9</sup> The word “speciesism” is coined from the words “racism” and “sexism”. It refers to arbitrary discrimination against sensitive individuals of a different species than our own. speciesism gives rise to brutal exploitation, as the majority of humans in our society consider animals to be commodities, used for such derisory ends as breeding for slaughter then consumption.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. David Olivier, “Les espèces non plus n’existent pas”, *Les Cahiers antispécistes* n°11, Dec. 1994.

<sup>11</sup> In *Animal, mon prochain* (Éditions Odile Jacob, 1997), Florence Burgat sets forth an inventory and critical analysis of theories that support this distinction. Ethical philosophy rarely cites, in such an abrupt manner, the “natural” frontier that delimits the human species as a morally relevant criterion in itself. Rather it claims that the members of this species are alone in possessing other, relevant characteristics. A more acceptable means to the same end. Over the course of the past thirty years, these positions have been systematically analysed, in particular by English-language philosophers (P. Singer, T. Regan, J. Rachels, etc.) who have revealed their shortcomings. Texts by them, and by others on the same subject, can be read online in French at [cahiers-antispecistes.org](http://cahiers-antispecistes.org) and [tahn-party.org](http://tahn-party.org).



about the cerebrally dead, whom we feel obliged to declare “clinically dead” (when they are unarguably alive) so that we can “unplug” them? There is no scientific definition of human which everyone, irrespective of philosophical or theological presuppositions, can accept. Note also that the characteristics put forward to justify discrimination against non-humans (intelligence, reason, freedom, being “removed from nature”, etc.) are equally undefined and, more importantly, have *no connection* with what they are supposed to justify. Thankfully they are not taken seriously with respect to the many humans who are neither intelligent, nor reasonable, nor free... Curiously though, when it comes to animals these same arguments are accepted without question. We have no scruples in treating them in such a way that, each day in France, tens of millions of animals feel fear, anguish, suffering, boredom or anger. Our behaviour is the cause of unpleasant, painful or unbearable sensations that we hope never to experience ourselves. If we took these contradictions seriously we could change individual and collective behaviour to immediately end most of this suffering.

Already, two centuries ago, Jeremy Bentham summed up objections to speciesism in these terms:

“The French have already discovered that the blackness of skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty for discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as more conversable animal, than an infant of a day or a week or even a month old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?”<sup>12</sup>

This day of liberation has yet to come and now, as then, discrimination towards animals is as arbitrary as racism. The omnipresent, mass, ferocious exploitation that comes from this discrimination is as morally unjustifiable as was slavery. It is one of the cornerstones on which our civilisation is built. One can reasonably imagine that if naturalism still has such a fundamental place in our culture this is, to a large extent, because it is essential in justifying speciesism.

The value of our humanity is, it seems, proportionate to our contempt for animals. Humanity is wholly defined as opposed to “animality”, i.e. the pre-designated representatives of a Nature with which it differs on every point. Humans are individuals with an intrinsic value and history. Humans have the faculty to reason, a conscience, they are free. Humans have brilliantly emerged from a “natural state” whereas animals are functional cogs in the order (of Nature). Animals are specimens, examples of their

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<sup>12</sup> *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789).

species acting entirely on instinct<sup>13</sup>. They are prisoners of their naturalness with no hope of remission. We have divided the real world into two empires, each defined in opposition to the other. One is the realm of freedom, individuality and exclusive dignity. The other is the realm of determinism and functionality with no inherent value. In this we accept a dual moral standard derived from Christian essentialism: a moral standard of equality within the human species' "biological" group, and a fundamentally elitist, hierarchical moral standard with respect to the individuals of other species. Racist and sexist discrimination is based on the hierarchical "element" of our moral standard. By naturalising the targeted categories we exclude them from the group of "equals" and put them on the "other side of the barrier." Further proof, were it needed, of how very arbitrary and dangerous are these notions of Humanity and Nature that are nonetheless supposed to underpin our ethics and, therefore, politics.

Any radical differences to be made within the real do not lie in oppositions between natural and human, natural and social, natural and artificial, innate and acquired<sup>14</sup> etc. From a scientific, philosophical and also ethical point of view, the distinction we should make is not that between supposedly "free beings" and "natural beings" but between sentient matter and inanimate matter, between real things that experience sensations and so feel desire and act according to their own motivations, and other things that feel nothing and have no interests, that care for nothing and give no value to events and no purpose to their existence. Between sentient and insentient beings, between animals, to take a short-cut, and stones or plants. More than the existence of a reflexive consciousness, the "simple" fact that matter can, in certain cases, feel sensations is a vast enigma. Explaining this mystery will no doubt be one of the challenges facing science over the course of the new century.

The only *objective* values are those which each sentient living being gives its own life, its experiences and the world around it. In this respect the world is neither pointless nor absurd; it has a meaning or more exactly many meanings! These meanings result not from a whole but from each of the beings which, one by one, because they are sentient, give meaning to their individual world. The only things that have a value *in themselves*

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<sup>13</sup> Instinct remains a central element in naturalist rhetoric regarding animals, although no modern-day ethologist would dare refer to a notion on a par with Molière's "vertus dormitiva." Its main advantage is to exclude the idea that animals (or, not such a long time ago, other dominated classes such as women and Blacks) act subjectively, and to *evoke* (but not explain) how the species transmits to the individual the natural function it must fulfil.

<sup>14</sup> Only a belief in nature can explain the ongoing argument of "nature vs. nurture" in humans, the innate vs. the acquired (in relation, for example, to sex or "race"). The "innate" and the "acquired" are inextricable, and always the result of a great many heterogeneous causes. Trying to divide these causes into two such categories would be pointless. Furthermore, and contrary to what one may hope or fear, the so-called "innate" qualities are in no way related to nature. Innate qualities relate *neither* to an essence *nor* to a purpose ("must be"). It is wrong to believe that a supposedly innate quality will remain fixed and unchanged (and in certain cases "unconscious", requiring neither subjective perception nor an individual decision to occur) while an acquired quality can always be changed or improved (as well as being conscious and subject to individual will).

are these sentient beings. All of us who experience the world, who experience our lives, who feel pain and pleasure, desire and repulsion, who know what it is to want, to desire and to refuse. All of us: not just humans but all beings with the capacity to feel and experience.

Because it is excluded from the values espoused by Humanism (such as Reason and Liberty), sensibility has been devalued. Even so, over recent decades suffering and pleasure have increasingly become the focus of our attention *in themselves*. We are witnessing the development of palliative care for humans, and even pets, and no longer operate on new-born babies without anaesthetic<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, we are beginning to care about the well-being of farm animals. While we are, of course, still a long way from demanding the same degree of consideration for all sentient beings, concern for affects, sensations and emotions is beginning to emerge; sensibility is valued in its own right. We believe this is the start of a movement that has its roots in previous centuries, when sensitivity to suffering (one's own and that of others) slowly gained in importance. We could call this growing attention to our sentient life the "sensibilist" movement. A word yet to find its way into dictionaries.

## For an end to Nature and a return to ethics and politics

To "obey nature" is devoid of meaning. By blurring distinctions (and in particular through an unjustifiable amalgamation of two separate meanings of the word "law", which refers to either a principle or an order), a multifarious current of thought claims to base its ethics on "respect" for "natural order" or on the observance of "natural laws". To refer to this idea of nature is no less than a call or a return to order.

Received ideas continue to spread without ever being critically questioned. Yet empty or wrong propositions don't become right simply through force of repetition. They constitute a danger because they offer an illusory or erroneous line of conduct in the face of very real problems. Rather than basing their judgement on clear principles, many of the movements trying to make today's world a better place are impeded because they invoke nature instead.

Citing a criterion relating to naturality rather than to justice is a way to give credence to all forms of injustice. Ethics is the pursuit of good. The only ethics worthy of their name are those which apply to all beings on which we can inflict good or bad, meaning all conscious (sentient) beings. This stems from the principle of justice or equity: equality, by definition, refuses all form of arbitrary discrimination.

Many people today prefer to look back with nostalgia on a "golden age" or "traditional and harmonious ways of life" that never really existed, rather than fighting here and now to at last bring about worlds that care about other worlds, about *all* others.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Claude Guillon, *À la vie à la mort. Maîtrise de la douleur et droit à la mort* (Noësis, 1997).

Nor has politics, if its desire is to be based on ethics, anything to gain from anchoring its values in a sentimental concept of nature.

Thankfully there is no naturalist destiny: it is in no-one's "nature" to prefer to bow down to Order rather than to freely debate what it is just, or not, to do.

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