## 8.1 The Nature of Nature

One remedy for our contemporary ills could be the ancient recommendation to live 'according to nature', though some would dismiss such an old fashioned view as irrelevant in the modern age. They reproach environmentalists for ignoring the demise of the very idea of 'nature'. For example, the progressive authors of *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*:

The categories of Nature, the environment, natural, and unnatural have long since been deconstructed. And yet they retain their mythic and debilitating hold over most environmentalists .... To posit that human societies should model themselves after living systems that are characterized as Nature, as environmentalists so often do, begs the question: which living systems?<sup>1</sup>

But why restrict the question to *living* systems? Why not follow many more ways through the Earth System: forest trails, watercourses, mountain paths—whatever's appropriate to the circumstances?

The advocates of *Break Through* don't say what they mean by 'deconstructed', but for many people the point is that because humans are natural beings, everything they do is natural. Just as it's natural for ants to live in colonies and beavers to build lodges to live in, so all the trappings of civilisation that human beings produce are natural. Yet if everything is natural and there's nothing that's not natural, 'nature' does become an empty and meaningless category.

But we can surely get a sense of what nature is if we begin with this scenario of the past. When the planet first came into being, some 4.5 billion years ago, there was the Earth and the Heavens around it, and then some half a billion years later single-cell *life* emerged. If *homo habilis*, 'able' or 'handy' man, came onto the scene around two million years ago, we can say that before then everything happened naturally, and that the whole sum of processes was 'Nature'. Of course other species affect what happens in the whole system, but with humans you have one species that can force things in ways that throw it out of balance.

As humans became more handy by developing bigger and better tools and technologies, they imposed greater changes on the natural places they found themselves in. Most civilisations inflicted considerable damage on natural ecosystems, through deforestation, for example; and if you say that it's natural for human beings to engage in deforestation, you would also have to say that nature inflicts damage on itself.<sup>2</sup> Human beings introduced artificial things into natural ecosystems early on; but since their shelters, clothing, and tools were composed of natural materials, the disruption was more at what ecologists call the 'source' (deforestation as a result of house-and ship-building) than in the 'sink' (the surrounding ecosystems).

In the early stages people did set some limits to the exploitation of the natural world because they regarded it as a living being, a matrix for our lives as humans, an organic whole that was often viewed in mythical images of divinity (the Earth Goddess Gaia for the ancient Greeks) and motherhood (Mother Earth, Mother Nature). Earth images of motherhood and the feminine are central in Chinese Daoist philosophy, as exemplified in these lines from *Laozi*:

The spirit of the valley never dies.

This is called the mysterious female.

The gateway of the mysterious female

Is called the root of heaven and earth.<sup>3</sup>

But then came the Death of Nature—at least in Europe, with the advent of the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—as recounted by Carolyn Merchant in her fine book of that name.<sup>4</sup> A pioneer of 'ecofeminism', she showed how the idea of nature was deprived of life through a process of suppressing the female principle, which went along comfortably with the oppression of actual women. (Nature deprived of life? But the word comes from the Latin *natura*, 'birth', from *nasci*, 'to be born', and *natus*, 'born'—whence 'native', 'nation', and so forth.)

Considering the underlying philosophy, Merchant describes how the traditional understanding of nature as an organic whole in which all parts are interrelated was replaced by a view of the world as a lifeless mechanism consisting of inert particles moved by forces external to them. And when you understand the natural world as lifeless and soulless, and thus of a different order of being from us animated humans, it's tempting to think you can manipulate it for your own purposes with impunity.

Human control over the natural world assumed a whole new dimension with the Industrial Revolution, and with the development of *synthetic* products in the mid-twentieth century it went beyond an inconspicuous but significant limit. Under the slogan 'Better Living through Chemistry', this phenomenon introduced a flood of synthetic chemical compounds into the biosphere—unnatural substances that can't be taken up into the natural cycles of ecosystems. Whereas natural products biodegrade and become food for something else, synthetic products became a new kind of waste that disrupts ecosystem functioning. Here's a case where it helps to distinguish between what's natural and what's artificial, so as to prevent the latter from overwhelming the former.

After the Death of Nature, toward the end of the last century we got to the End of Nature—as described by Bill McKibben in his fine book of that name, which sounded a cogent early warning of the dangers of global warming. Since we're treating ourselves to 'a new atmosphere', one that's warming the planet up, we're affecting *everything* beneath the Heavens, the whole earth. While aggravating global warming, our industrial activity is lethally polluting the planet: 'Each cubic yard of air, each square foot of soil, is stamped indelibly with our crude imprint, our X.'<sup>5</sup> We have stained the entire earth with soot and other particulate matter, organic and synthetic chemical compounds—along with the occasional burst of radioactive particles.

So: in the beginning it was Nature only; then human beings emerged and a part of nature came apart in such a way as to overwhelm the whole, eventually spewing forth exhaust gases and other pollutants, and laying waste to the planet with synthetic products. The distinction between the natural and artificial is crucial to our understanding of global warming: natural variation or human activity? And if we want to save the species and let it thrive, we do well to acknowledge the benefits of according with what's natural—especially when it comes to sources of energy and their effect on our environment.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 133.
- <sup>2</sup> See Donald Hughes, An Environmental History of the World: Humankind's Changing Role in the Community of Life (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), chapter 3; also Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), chapter 3.
- <sup>3</sup> *Laozi* 6, 28, 61, 78.
- <sup>4</sup> Carolyn Merchant, The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).
- <sup>5</sup> Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989), 104.