

Nature Naturalized:

A Darwinian Defense of the Nature/Culture Distinction

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When Bertrand Russell says, “Man is a part of nature, not something contrasted with nature. His thoughts and his bodily movements follow the same laws that describe the motions of stars and atoms,”¹ I am inclined to agree. Russell is expressing the doctrine of philosophical naturalism—the view that nothing supernatural exists. Thus, Russell is expressing his disagreement with those who would hold that humans incorporate elements of the natural and the supernatural (body by Nature, rational soul by God). I am a philosophical naturalist and am entirely in agreement with Russell on this question. However, when Robert Elliot says, “I shall take it that ‘natural’ means something like ‘unmodified by human activity’,”² I am also inclined to agree. Elliott is both defining what ‘nature’ is and identifying what (at least some) environmentalists value in the natural world. He identifies it as that which is unmodified by human culture and technology. Elliott is identifying what it is that environmentalists commonly refer to when we talk about ‘nature’, but this definition is certainly not limited to environmentalists. It is, I believe, the most common use of the term ‘nature’ in the English language today. The question then is whether this conception of nature as that which is not a product of human culture and technology is compatible with philosophical naturalism. I shall argue that despite their apparent incompatibility, they are indeed compatible.

¹ Bertrand Russell, p. 48.

² Robert Elliot, p. 82.

When I first considered this question, I was inclined to believe that any apparent conflict between philosophical naturalism and the common understanding of nature was due to a failure to distinguish between different meanings of the term ‘nature’. However, I have come to the conclusion that the difficulty cannot be cleared up this easily. Some who are clearly aware of the different meanings of ‘nature’ continue to insist that humans are a part of nature and that any attempt to define nature in opposition to human culture and technology is misguided.³

I considered the possibility that those who make this claim are guilty of a version of the genetic fallacy—because the human species is a product of nature (i.e. evolution by natural selection), then everything that humans do is natural. This is what it seemed to me might be going on when Callicott says, “If man is a natural, a wild, an evolving species, not essentially different in this respect from all others... then the works of man, however precocious, are as natural as those of beavers, or termites, or any other species that dramatically modify their habitats.”⁴ If by ‘nature’ we mean ‘that which is not a product of human culture and technology’, then Callicott’s argument is logically equivalent to the following: The species *homo sapiens* is not a product of human culture and technology; therefore, the works of humans are not products of human culture and technology. This is clearly a fallacious argument. However, once again, I have come to the conclusion that the difficulty cannot be resolved this easily.

While Callicott is aware that the natural can be distinguished from either the supernatural or the cultural, he seems to believe that the distinction between the natural and the cultural is

³ Callicott (1991), Turner (1994). See the following section for a summary of their views.

⁴ Callicott (1991), pp. 236-42.

dependant upon, or derived from, the distinction between the natural and the supernatural.⁵

The reasoning goes something like this: If the possession of a rational soul, or some such thing, is supposed to place us on the supernatural side of the natural/supernatural divide, and if human culture is an expression of that rational soul, then the distinction between the natural and the cultural is really just another version of the distinction between the natural and the supernatural. Once we recognize that humans possess nothing supernatural, then we ought to reject the nature/culture distinction. This is the challenge presented by Callicott and others who claim that humans are a part of nature and that everything we do is natural, and it is my intention to respond to this challenge. I intend to show that a philosophical naturalist need not reject the nature/culture distinction.

A History of Confusion and Disagreement

In his 1874 essay, 'On Nature', John Stuart Mill said of the terms 'nature' and 'natural', "it is unfortunate that a set of terms which play so great a part in moral and metaphysical speculation should have acquired many meanings different from the primary one, yet sufficiently allied to it to admit of confusion. The words have thus become entangled in so many foreign associations, mostly of a very powerful and tenacious character, that they have come to excite, and to be the symbols of, feelings which their original meaning will by no means justify, and

⁵ After hearing Callicott say that nature is not something separate from the works of humans because "humans are just big apes," I asked him why we couldn't just say that humans are a part of nature in the sense that we are not supernatural and that we are separate from nature in the sense that the works of humans are products of culture. In fact, Callicott suggests this line of reasoning when he says "In one important respect we are different from other species... the cultural component in human behavior is so greatly developed as to have become more a difference in kind than a difference in degree. To suggest that the works of man are not natural is not to suggest that they are supernatural, but that they are products of culture." (1991, pp. 236-42) I then asked him, "Are you afraid that the distinction between the natural and the cultural collapses into the distinction between the natural and the supernatural?" and he said "Yes."

which have made them one of the most copious sources of false taste, false philosophy, false morality, and even bad law.”⁶

Mill identifies two significant meanings of the term ‘nature.’ In the first sense, nature (N1) is everything that ever has existed or ever will exist in the physical world. In this sense of the term, the natural is contrasted with the supernatural. The claim that humans are a part of nature in this sense is driven by the realization that humans evolved through the same process that produced all other species on earth. In the second sense of the term, nature (N2) is understood in contrast to art, and the natural is understood in contrast to the artificial or the artificial.⁷ In this sense of the term nature can be understood in contrast to the products of human culture. Automobiles and desktop computers are products of human culture and hence are not a part of nature. Redwood trees and the Grand Canyon are not products of human culture; hence they are natural (i.e. a part of nature).

While much has been written about the meaning of the terms ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ since Mill’s essay, the confusion of which he spoke persists and is still a source of bad philosophy and sometimes bad law. While there are other meanings of ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ that could be mentioned, we will focus on these two meanings which Mill identified.

The Attack on the Nature/Culture Distinction

Many environmental philosophers and environmental activists speak of nature as something separate from human culture – something to be valued, respected, cared for, liberated,

⁶ Mill, J.S., “On Nature,” 1996, p. 7. Originally published in 1874 as the first of three essays in the volume *Nature, The Utility of Religion and Theism*. The edition of 1904, by Watts & Co., for the Rationalist Press is available electronically at www.lancs.ac.uk/users/philosophy/texts/mill_on.htm.

⁷ Another common sense of the term ‘natural’ is one that indicates that something is normal or statistically common. For example, one might say, “His natural position is third base, but he is playing in left field today.” There may be other senses of the term as well, but I will be focusing on the two identified by Mill because they are particularly relevant to the question, “Are humans a part of nature?”

etc.⁸ I already mentioned Robert Elliot's definition of 'natural' as an example of this view. Elliot later says, "it is our use, driven by cultural and economic norms, of science and technology to transform the environment that makes what we do non-natural.... We leave nature through our culture and technology, so to speak, and re-enter it as an alien species."⁹ Robert Goodin says, "The products of a purely natural process are ones that are, by definition, not the product of deliberate human design."¹⁰ These authors are clearly conceiving of nature in Mill's second sense (N2), as distinguished from culture. However, the seemingly simple distinction between nature and culture has recently come under attack from two directions.

Some people have suggested that humans are a part of nature and that human culture is a product of nature and hence everything we do is natural. J. Baird Callicott (1991) has suggested, for example, that we have no basis for saying that beaver dams are natural and human dams are not.¹¹ According to this line of argument, the nature/culture distinction is a false one because human culture is a part of nature. Furthermore, some environmentalists argue that it is important to realize that humans are a part of nature in order to overcome the anthropocentric tradition which identifies nature as something separate from humans and over which humans are given dominion.¹² Thus, we have some environmentalists emphasizing the value of nature as that which is in some way separate from humans, some environmentalists saying that nature should not be conceived in separation from humans, and some seeming to do both at the same time

⁸ See, for example, John Passmore (1974), Kate Soper (1995), Robert Elliot (1997), Val Plumwood (1991 and 1993), Holmes Rolston (1994), and Robert Goodin (1992).

⁹ Robert Elliot (1997), p. 122.

¹⁰ Robert Goodin (1992), p. 38.

¹¹ J. Baird Callicott, "The wilderness idea revisited: The sustainable development alternative," *The Environmental Professional*, 13, 1991, pp. 236-42.

¹² See for example, Roderick Nash (1989), Warwick Fox (1984), and John Seed (1988).

while speaking out of different sides of their mouths.¹³ We find this tension in the words of environmental philosophers, environmental activists, and the general public.

A second attack on the nature/culture distinction has come out of the postmodern tradition. According to this second line of argument, the concept of ‘nature’ is a cultural construction. Thus, the nature/culture dichotomy is a false one because nature is really a construct of human culture.¹⁴ The first attack subsumes culture under nature, and the second subsumes nature under culture. In this paper, I will be directing my arguments to the first line of attack.

To illustrate the extent and character of attack that has been made with great furiousness, it may be useful to cite several examples. Warwick Fox (1984) says, “We can make no firm ontological divide in the field of existence... there is no bifurcation in reality between the human and the non-human realms... to the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness.”¹⁵ Mary E. Clark (1992) says, “Apparent conflicts between human jobs and welfare and the interests of wildlife can frequently be resolved if man is perceived as *part* [her emphasis] of Nature rather than in opposition to it.” Frederick Turner (1994) says that one of the unspoken principles of the ecological religion holds that “Humans are different and separate from, and subordinate to, a transcendent Nature. Here the environmentalist religion ignores the central scientific principle of evolution, which treats humans as a part of nature....

¹³ William R. Jordan III (1994) speaks sometimes of developing a healthy relationship between nature and culture. At other times he talks about the “proper relationship between humans and the *rest* of nature” (my emphasis). He says that humans “have always—at least since the development of language—distinguished between nature and culture and have felt a measure of tension between themselves and the rest of nature.” By sliding back and forth between talk of the relation between nature and culture, and the relation between humans and the rest of nature, Jordan seems to be claiming that humans and human culture are and are not a part of nature. This would not necessarily be a problem if Jordan were to explain how this can be so—by distinguishing between different senses of ‘nature’, for example. However, Jordan does not clarify this point. When Jordan speaks of developing a healthy relationship with nature, one is left to wonder what exactly this ‘nature’ is with which one is supposed to develop a healthy relationship.

¹⁴ See Evernden (1992), Vogel (1996), and Dwyer (1996). For responses to this line of attack, see Michael Soulé in Soulé and Lease, eds. (1995) and Rolston (1997).

¹⁵ Cited in Plumwood (1993), p. 176.

the distinction [the environmentalist religion] draws between the human and the natural is patently false.” And he goes on to say, “We are descended in a direct evolutionary line from natural animal species, and are ourselves a natural species.”

The critiques of the nature/culture distinction offered by Callicott, Jordan, Fox, Clark, and Turner suggests that this distinction is inherently anti-Darwinian. Callicott (1991) explicitly makes this point when he says, “The [wilderness] concept perpetuates the pre-Darwinian metaphysical dichotomy between ‘man’ and nature, albeit with an opposite spin.... In the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, man alone among all the other creatures is created in the image of God. In the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition, among all other animals, man is uniquely rational.... Since Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man*, however, we have known that man is a part of nature.”

This attack on the nature/culture distinction is based on two key claims. The first claim is both biological and metaphysical. It is the claim that the distinction is false because humans are a part of nature and a product of evolution by natural selection. The second claim is an ethical claim that the distinction is misguided and morally suspect because it rests on or creates a dualism, a value hierarchy that places humans above nature in the order of creation and fails to recognize our ecological connectedness with “the rest of nature.” Thus, this line of argument suggests, on metaphysical and moral grounds, that a distinction between nature and culture cannot or should not be made.

Initial Response

The first point that is worth noting about these attacks is that if the idea of ‘nature’ is to be meaningful at all, it must be distinguished from something. If everything that exists and

everything that could possibly exist is “natural,” then the term has no useful meaning. Those who suggest that humans are a part of nature, and thus everything we do is natural, have seemingly lost any meaning the term might have. We must ask of those who say that the Glen Canyon Dam and the skyscrapers of Manhattan are natural, “What do you mean by ‘natural’?” If a Manhattan skyscraper is natural, then what is not natural? If the terms ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ are to mean anything, there must be something that is not natural.

More to the point, this attack simply fails to recognize the different meanings of the terms ‘nature’ and ‘natural’. The claim that humans are a part of nature is based on Mill’s first meaning of ‘nature’ (N1). It is the claim that we are animals and nothing more. The realization (facilitated by Darwin) that humans are products of nature does not provide grounds for eliminating the nature/culture distinction that rests on Mill’s second meaning of nature (N2). In this sense, humans are products of nature in so far as we were produced by natural rather than cultural processes. However, it does not follow from the fact that the human species was produced by natural processes that everything we do is natural. As long as we keep clear about the different senses of ‘nature’, it would seem that we could, without difficulty, claim that humans are part of nature (N1) in the sense that we are products of evolution and that we do not have eternal souls while continuing to define nature (N2) in contrast to the products of human culture. We are simply using the term ‘nature’ in two different senses.

This initial response may be enough to show the weakness in Turner’s simplistic claim that the distinction between the human and the natural is “patently false.” However, there is, I believe, a more sophisticated argument that cannot be so easily dismissed. This argument, which will be addressed in the next section, is based on the fact that N1 and N2 are not simple homonyms. They are not two different words with entirely separate meanings that happen to be

spelled the same way. As Mill said, these different meanings of 'nature' are "sufficiently allied to admit of confusion." There are connections between the meanings of N1 and N2, and these connections have led some philosophical naturalists¹⁶ to reject the claim that nature can or should be conceived in any sense as something separate from humans.

A New Argument Against the Nature/Culture Distinction

Philosophical naturalism is the denial of the existence of anything supernatural. When philosopher "naturalize" a concept, such as 'mind', they characterize it or analyze it without reference to anything supernatural, such as a rational, immaterial, and eternal soul. In the wake of the Darwinian revolution, a number of us think of ourselves as philosophical naturalists. Callicott has said that as a naturalist he believes that we are just big monkeys and that humans are not separate from nature.¹⁷ In claiming that everything that exists is natural rather than supernatural, philosophical naturalism employs Mill's first meaning of 'nature' (N1).

On the other hand, people like E.O. Wilson, Aldo Leopold, Rachael Carson, John Muir, David Thoreau, Jane Goodall, Theodore Roosevelt, etc. are often described as being "naturalists" because they study nature, write about it, advocate for its protection, etc. And there are many amateur naturalists who can tell you the names of every bird and plant you see while walking through the woods with them. When these people are referred to as naturalists, it is clearly not meant to suggest that they deny the existence of the supernatural, though that may well be the case for some of them. A 'naturalist' in this sense of the word is someone who loves and/or studies nature (N2). 'Nature' in this context is generally understood in contrast with the products of human culture.

¹⁶ A 'philosophical naturalist' is someone who denies the existence of anything supernatural. This would include such philosophers as Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Bertrand Russell.

¹⁷ He made this comment to me in a private conversation, and he has said similar things in print.

If the claim that nature (N2) can be understood in contrast to the products of human culture ultimately depends on the notion that humans are separate from nature (N1), perhaps because our culture is taken to be indicative of our possession of a rational soul or some other feature that places us higher in the Great Chain of Being than nature, then those of us who value nature intrinsically and aesthetically, or who want to develop attitudes of respect or caring for nature (N2), or who in any way conceive of nature as something that is distinguished from the products of human culture, may be inadvertently relying on a belief system that involves the denial of philosophical naturalism.

Univocal, Equivocal, and Analogical Predication¹⁸

Consider the following claims which predicate ‘naturalness’ (N) of various subjects:

1. N(h) Humans are a part of nature. We are just big apes who were created by the process of natural selection.
2. N(i) This ice cream is all natural. It has no artificial ingredients.
3. N(m) The Manhattan skyline is a part of nature. It was built by humans who are a part of nature, and it was built from raw materials found in nature.
4. N(b) This is a natural bridge. This rock formation was created by erosion as this river wore down the rock.
5. N(t) Thunder is a natural phenomenon.
6. $\forall x(B(x) \rightarrow N(x))$ All bridges are natural.

Let us assume that the claim that something is a “part of nature” is equivalent to the claim that it is “natural.” Let us then ask whether the same property is being predicated of humans, ice cream, the Manhattan skyline, the rock formation, thunder, and all bridges. If two things are *univocally* natural, then they are natural in the same sense, and they possess the same property.

We may define univocity as follows:

a and b are univocally N *iff.* (i) a is N; (ii) b is N; and (iii) the accounts of N-ness in 'a is N' and 'b is N' are the same.

¹⁸ I borrow my accounts of univocal, equivocal, and analogical predication from Christopher Shields and St. Thomas Aquinas.

The Manhattan skyline and the Golden Gate bridge are univocally natural because in both cases the account of naturalness is the same. Both are part of the natural (N1) world, and were not created by miracle or any other supernatural act.

The natural bridge and the Manhattan skyline are also both a part of N1. However, when one claims that this bridge is a *natural* bridge, one presumably does not mean to be claiming that it was created without divine intervention. One means to suggest that it is not an artifact. The natural bridge and the Manhattan skyline are not univocally natural in this sense. The natural bridge is a part of N2, but the Manhattan skyline is not.

One might be inclined to suggest that N1 and N2 are homonyms—that they are two different words that happen to be spelled the same. If this were the correct account, then the predicate ‘is-a-part-of-nature’ or ‘natural’ would be used *equivocally* in examples three and four above. Equivocal predication may be defined as follows:

a and b are equivocally N *iff*: (i) a is N; (ii) b is N; and (iii) the accounts of N-ness in 'a is N' and 'b is N' are different and unrelated.

There is, however, a third possibility . Perhaps the Manhattan skyline and the natural bridge are not univocally natural and are not equivocally natural. If the accounts of naturalness in N1 and N2 are not the same and not completely unrelated (they are “sufficiently allied to admit of confusion”), then we might say that naturalness is being predicated *analogously* of the Manhattan skyline and of the natural bridge.

Aquinas says that there are two modes in which we might predicate a term of different subjects analogously. Let us call the first of these modes *source dependent* analogical predication. In this mode, a particular property is predicated analogically of two subjects by virtue of a property

held by some third subject to which both make reference. Source dependent analogical predication of some property, F, for two subjects a and b may be defined as follows:

a and b are analogically N in a source dependent way *iff*: (i) a is N; (ii) b is N; and (iii) there is some c such that the accounts of N-ness in 'a is N' and 'b is N' necessarily make reference to the account of N-ness in 'c is N' in an asymmetrical way.

Let us call the second mode of analogical predication *ordered analogical predication*.

According to this mode of predication, there exists an order, or priority, between the two subjects of which a property is analogically predicated. Ordered analogical predication may be defined as follows:

a and b are analogically N in an ordered way *iff*: (i) a is N; (ii) b is N; and (iii) the account of N-ness in 'b is N' necessarily makes reference to the account of N-ness in 'a is N' in an asymmetrical way.

Thus, in saying 'a is part of nature' (N1), and 'b is natural' (N2), one might claim that the account of naturalness in 'b is N' necessarily makes reference to the account of naturalness in 'a is N'. This would be the case, for example, if one supposed that the distinction between the natural and the cultural necessarily made reference to the distinction between the supernatural and the natural by placing human culture in the realm of the supernatural.

The worry of people like Callicott is that the distinction between nature and human culture was originally based on the idea that humans were created in the image of God, with rational souls, and that humans are to nature as God is to humans. They worry that the account of naturalness (N2) in the proposition N(b) 'This is a natural bridge' necessarily makes reference to the account of naturalness (N1) in the proposition N(t) 'Thunder is a natural phenomenon'. Thunder is a natural phenomenon in the sense that it is not the work of supernatural forces. If the identification of the bridge as a natural bridge is meant to distinguish it from the "supernatural" bridges which are produced by the Godlike forces of human culture, then it would appear that the thunder and the bridge are analogically natural in an ordered way. Callicott is worried that any attempt to draw a distinction between nature and human culture is ultimately dependant upon the

mistaken belief that human culture is evidence of our Godliness. He is thus worried that any attempt to draw a distinction between nature and human culture entails the denial of philosophical naturalism.

The New Argument Against the Nature/Culture Distinction goes something like this:

1. Philosophical naturalism is correct.
2. The nature/culture distinction depends on the denial of philosophical naturalism because N1 and N2 are analogically related. That is, N1 and N2 are analogs such that the account of naturalness in 'b is N2' necessarily makes reference to the account of naturalness in 'a is N1'.
3. Thus, the nature/culture distinction is incorrect.
4. Furthermore, the nature/culture distinction covertly imports theological baggage.
5. Therefore, the nature/culture distinction should be rejected.

Callicott worries that one cannot consistently be a philosophical naturalist who denies the existence of anything supernatural while simultaneously drawing a distinction between nature and human culture. I argue that these two positions are logically consistent—that it is possible to give an account of nature (N2) in entirely naturalistic (N1) terms—that nature can be naturalized.

Nature Naturalized

J.T. Bonner (1980) defines culture as “information passed from generation to generation non-genetically.” Rolston (1994) says, “Information acquired during an organism's lifetime is not transmitted genetically; the essence of culture is acquired information transmitted to the next generation.” Such an analysis, it seems to me, allows us to define culture in a way that is entirely

consistent with Callicott's (and my own) philosophical naturalism. This definition of culture does not in any way place culture in the realm of the supernatural. If we define 'nature' negatively, as that which is not a product of human culture, then we can have an entirely naturalistic analysis of nature (N2). This account does not depend on an account of the natural as distinguished from the supernatural. The account of 'culture' as information transmitted non-genetically certainly does not entail that the information is transmitted supernaturally or that the ability to transmit cultural information exempts human beings from the laws of nature. The analysis of 'culture' can be cashed out in entirely naturalistic terms. Since the analysis of 'nature' is derived from the naturalistic analysis of 'culture' plus the logical operator of negation, it involves no denial of philosophical naturalism. Thus, premise (2) of the above argument is false.

The account of naturalness (N2) in the proposition N(b) 'This is a natural bridge' does not necessarily make reference to the account of naturalness (N1) in the proposition N(t) 'Thunder is a natural phenomenon'. The distinction between natural bridges and artifactual bridges need not involve any suggestion that the artifactual bridges are in any way supernatural or that human culture is a Godlike phenomenon. There are good reasons for distinguishing between those things that are products of information transmitted non-genetically (i.e. culture) and those things that are not. Our ability through the use of spoken and written language to accumulate information and pass it on non-genetically allows us to create technologies and modify our environments and to produce things that are qualitatively different from those things which have been produced by nature (N2).

The nature that is of particular interest to environmentalists who care about such things as wilderness is N2. It is worth pointing out that naturalness (N2) comes in degrees. The question,

“Is this natural (N2)?,” will not necessarily receive a yes or no answer. I contend that naturalness is a matter of degree and that something can be more or less natural. We may say, for example, that dairy and beef cows are less natural than bison and more natural than vacuum cleaners. This is because a cow is partly, but not entirely, a product of human culture. Humans have selectively bred cows to have certain characteristics in order to suit human needs. However, humans have not designed every part of the cow from scratch.

Again, something can be more or less natural; the judgment about how natural it is turns out to be a judgment of the extent to which it is a product of human culture. Bryers ice cream claims to be “all natural.” How can we understand this claim? Surely ice cream is a product of human culture. However, Bryers seems to be making a claim about the ingredients it uses in its ice cream. While some ice cream manufacturers use synthetic chemicals (chemicals which exist in the world only as a result of human culture and engineering), Bryers uses ingredients like sugar, milk, and vanilla. Of course, the sugar that exists in nature is not the refined sugar that Bryers uses, so I am not inclined to accept Bryers’ claim that it is “all natural.” Still, I understand what they mean when they say that their ice cream is more natural than those that use synthetic chemicals.

Why only human culture?

It should be clear from my definition of ‘culture’ that non-human animals can have cultures. Wolves, elephants, monkeys and many other animals pass on information to their offspring non-genetically. In fact, Bonner (from who I borrowed this definition of culture) was writing specifically about the evolution of culture in animals. Why then, you might ask, did I choose to define nature as that which is not the product of *human* culture? Human culture is

unique in terms of the amount of information we are able to accumulate and pass on from generation to generation and in the ways we are able to use that information to restructure our environment. As human culture evolved and we were able to subdue nature more and more and manipulate it to serve our purposes, we developed a need to distinguish between those parts of the world that we had brought under our control and those that we had not. Concepts like 'nature' and 'wilderness' evolved as ways of making that distinction.

The amazing quantity of information that we are able to accumulate and pass on is primarily a function of spoken and written human language. Imagine how little information we would be able to pass on to our offspring if we lacked language and printing. In fact, I contend that without these things, we would have no need to distinguish between nature and culture. Hence, it makes sense that we distinguish nature from human culture, but not from lion culture. However, this claim is not central to my argument; nor is it of great importance to me. If someone would prefer to define nature (N2) in opposition to all culture (human and nonhuman), I have no objection.

Are humans a part of nature?

This brings us back to one of the questions we started out with--are humans a part of nature? If the question is whether humans are a part of N1, the answer may depend upon whether one believes that humans were created in the image of God and given eternal souls. It is now the position of the Catholic church, for example, that it is alright to believe in evolution as an account of the origin of the human body, as long as one also believes that each person was given an eternal soul that is created by God. One who holds this position might claim that the human body is a part of N1, but that the soul is not. Philosophical naturalists, and I include

myself in this category, believe that humans (like everything else) can be explained in fully naturalistic terms, without reference to anything supernatural.

If the question is whether humans are a part of N2, the answer, of course, is yes and no. The question may be rephrased as follows: To what extent are we products of our cultures? In many ways I am a product of my culture. As is customary in my culture, I get my hair cut every few months. I wear clothes (and a certain kind of clothes at that). In my everyday life I am surrounded by products of my culture (television, books, CD's, people talking to each other, etc.). What I eat and how I think are heavily influenced by my culture. As I drive in my heated car listening to the tape deck, I am fairly disconnected from nature. Still, I am not entirely a product of my culture. My heart and the rest of my circulatory system, for example, are not primarily products of my culture, though someone's heart disease may be. I may have certain behavior patterns which have been ingrained in me by evolution. So, I am a part of nature in some ways and not in others.

An Argument from Authority

It is said that an argument from authority is an informal fallacy. However, when I am accused of holding a pre-Darwinian position, I cannot resist appealing to the authority of Charles Darwin. Not only did Darwin make free use of the distinction between nature and culture—or between the natural and the artificial—it played a central role in his theory. In developing his theory of evolution by natural selection, Darwin makes his case by comparing *natural* selection to the *artificial* selection carried out by people who breed plants and animals for human purposes. He says, for example, "I have called this principle, by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved, by the term of Natural Selection, in order to mark its relation to man's

power of selection. We have seen that man by selection can certainly produce great results, and can adapt organic beings to his own uses, through the accumulation of slight but useful variations, given to him by the hand of Nature. But Natural Selection, as we shall hereafter see, is a power incessantly ready for action, and is as immeasurably superior to man's feeble efforts, as the works of Nature are to those of Art."¹⁹ Callicott, et al, might argue that Darwin simply failed to realize the implications of his theory as it applies to the nature/culture distinction. However, I find this implausible given that his use of the nature/culture distinction occurs not as an incidental or off-handed remark, but right in the central concept of his theory of evolution. While anyone who regards the human ability to reason as evidence of the possession of an immortal and rational soul of supernatural origin is indeed operating within a pre-Darwinian worldview, I contend that there is nothing at all pre-Darwinian about the distinction between nature and culture.

Is it bad to be 'unnatural'?

In making the distinction between 'nature' and 'culture,' or 'natural' and 'unnatural,' I do not mean to suggest that anything that is natural is good and anything that is unnatural is bad. Clothing, eyeglasses, and jazz are all unnatural (i.e. they are products of human culture), but I would not wish to do away with any of them. I do hope that we will see some value in those parts of the world that exist in a relatively natural state and try to preserve some of them. However, this does not mean that anything that is unnatural must be bad. Naturalness is often, as Robert Elliott puts it, a value adding property.²⁰

¹⁹ Darwin, p. 108. Darwin repeatedly makes such statements throughout the *Origin* and the *Descent of Man*.

²⁰ Robert Elliot expresses similar ideas, saying, "Obviously some areas will be more natural than others, according to the degree to which they have been shaped by human activity. Indeed most rural landscapes will, on this view, count as non-natural to a very high degree.... So the distinction between natural and non-natural is not a sharp

Why We Need a Nature/Culture Distinction

1. The nature/culture distinction as I have described it is a metaphysically viable distinction. It is possible to make such a distinction between that which is to a large extent a product of human culture (understood as information passed from generation to generation non-genetically) and that which is not. Such a distinction can be made even though there is in fact a spectrum of entities in the world with varying degrees of naturalness. When we describe something as being natural (N2), we are claiming that it falls near one end of the spectrum. This is an empirical claim about its causal origins.
2. This distinction captures the most common usage of the terms 'nature' and 'natural' in ordinary language. Nobody who was planning a weekend in Manhattan would describe it as a weekend of "getting back to nature," unless they were speaking in jest. If such a distinction can be made, and it captures the ordinary understanding of the concept of 'nature' and use of the term, then the burden of proof fall heavily on those who argue that the distinction should be jettisoned.
3. This distinction can be made without reference to a distinction between the natural (N1) and the supernatural, or the suggestion that humans fall between the natural (N1) and supernatural realms. One who recognizes that humans are products of evolution by natural (N2) selection and who rejects the notion that humans are in any way of supernatural origin, is not thereby committed to saying that everything humans do is natural (N2). In fact,

distinction: rather the contrasting concepts mark out opposite ends of a continuum. What is certainly true is that an area of wilderness in which there has been some impact by humans, for example through weed removal or the eradication of feral animals, is overwhelmingly natural, in contrast to even a leafy suburban precinct. Nor do I intend the natural/non-natural distinction to parallel exactly some dependent moral evaluations; that is, I do not want to be taken here as claiming that what is natural is good and what if non-natural is not, or that the natural is always better than the non-natural. The distinction between natural and non-natural connects with valuation in subtler ways than that. (*Faking Nature: The ethics of environmental restoration*. Routledge, 1997, p. 82)

Darwin's use of the term 'natural selection' was meant to distinguish it from artificial selection. Thus, a Darwinian naturalist implicitly makes use of the nature/culture distinction. The denial of the nature/culture distinction is the truly anti-Darwinian position because it fails to understand the meaning of 'natural selection'. Just as philosophical naturalists (N1) give accounts of mind in naturalistic terms without reference to an eternal soul, so too we can give an account of culture in naturalistic terms as information passed from generation to generation, or individual to individual, non-genetically. We may then describe something as being natural (N2) to the extent that it is not a product of such information. Such an account does not in any way depend upon the N1 account of nature and does not suggest that humans or human culture are in any sense supernatural. Nor does it entail a nature/culture dualism which places human culture hierarchically above nature.

4. Such an account is not antithetical to environmental values, as some have suggested, because it does not import any theological notion of human dominion over nature. Furthermore, it is conducive to environmental values to the extent that it helps us to identify those things which environmentalists value and want to protect. Those who deny any distinction between nature and culture find themselves committed to the ridiculous claim that a nuclear waste is as much a part of nature as Moose droppings are. If humans are a part of nature and everything we do is natural, then there is the danger that people will justify environmental destruction on the grounds that it is "all a part of nature." As Val Plumwood (1993, pp. 177-178) says,

It is unclear how such a solution to removing human/nature dualism, by obliterating any human/nature distinction and dissolving self boundaries, is supposed to provide the basis for any environmental ethic. The analysis of humans as metaphysically unified with the cosmic whole will be equally true whatever relation humans stand in with nature – the situation of exploitation of nature exemplifies such metaphysical unity equally well as a conserver situation, and the human self is just as indistinguishable from the bulldozer and Coca Cola bottle as the rocks or the rainforest. What John Seed seems to have in mind here

is that once one has realised that one is indistinguishable from the rainforest, its needs will become one's own. But there is nothing to guarantee this – one could equally well take one's own needs for its.

The following example illustrates the possible environmental implications of the denial of any distinction between nature and culture.

Cumberland Island: A Case Study

Cumberland Island is Georgia's largest sea island, and much of the island is relatively undeveloped. Before it became a national park in 1973, much of the land on the island was owned by the Carnegie family. There are several historic structures on the island, including Plum Orchard, a thirty-room mansion on the edge of the 8,800 acre Cumberland wilderness. Water and decay are damaging this mansion, along with several of the historic structures on the island. The Park Service lacks the funds to preserve these sites. One proposal was to turn the mansion into an artists' colony. Environmentalists objected when the Park Service appeared ready to accept this proposal without a detailed study of the effects that it would have on the nearby wilderness. A recent bill known as the Cumberland Island Preservation Act proposed to help preserve these historic sites by opening up greater access for visitors. This bill has upset environmentalists who are worried about the effects that it would have on Cumberland's wild areas. This bill would give visitors access to Plum Orchard and other historical sites via a road from the boat landing area through the wilderness area. It would remove a portion of the wilderness area from wilderness protection in order to do so.

Janet "Gogo" Ferguson, the great, great granddaughter of Thomas and Lucy Carnegie, is one of the island's thirty permanent residents. She insists that plans for the island should not exclude human history. She says,

This push for a sort of utopian wilderness—and I consider myself one of the biggest environmentalists there is—it's wiping out human presence. And I don't

know where we extracted humans from nature. We're a part of it. We co-exist. We always have. We all love Cumberland Island. We just want to make sure that it's preserved whole, not just protecting, or creating, this so-called wilderness. (NPR, 1998)

Janet Ferguson's statement illustrates the confusion over the different senses of 'nature' that Mill spoke of in his essay, and it illustrates the danger of insisting on the claim the "humans are a part of nature" while denying any distinction between nature and culture.

Some people seem to think that in separating humans (or human culture) from nature, we are being anthropocentric. We are saying that we are special; we are somehow different from the rest of the world. The separation of humans from nature sounds to them suspiciously like the claim found in much Christian thinking that humans were created in God's image, and the rest of the world was given to us to use as we see fit. Many people see this as a primary source of our current ecological crisis and suggest that if we are to find a solution, we must recognize that humans are a part of nature. We are a product of evolution, just like all of the other animals that we see.

While I firmly believe that humans are a product of evolutionary processes and nothing more, I have argued that we must distinguish nature from something if we are to understand what it is. Those who see humans as a part of nature run the risk of saying that anything humans do is natural, and hence OK. I argue that if we truly care about saving nature, we must distinguish it from human culture. If the Glen Canyon Dam and the skyscrapers of Manhattan are a part of nature, then we have no reason to worry about saving the great expanses of wilderness in Utah or Alaska. We could turn them into parking lots without making them any less natural. Surely something has gone wrong when we say that anything humans do is natural. Furthermore, the grizzly bear catching a salmon in Alaska is not a construct of human culture. Even if we grant (as I think we should) that our ways of thinking about nature are influenced by our culture, we

should not conclude that everything that exists in nature is nothing more than a social construct.

But that is a subject for a different paper.²¹

²¹ See Rolston (1997).

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