
Family ties

Human views of Nature – time to see goodness before wildness?

To be human is to be part of Nature. And yet to be human is to be different from the rest of Nature. We define ourselves by both, despite the contradiction. Like every teenager, the adolescent human species wrestles with the dilemma of wanting to belong, yet wanting to be different.

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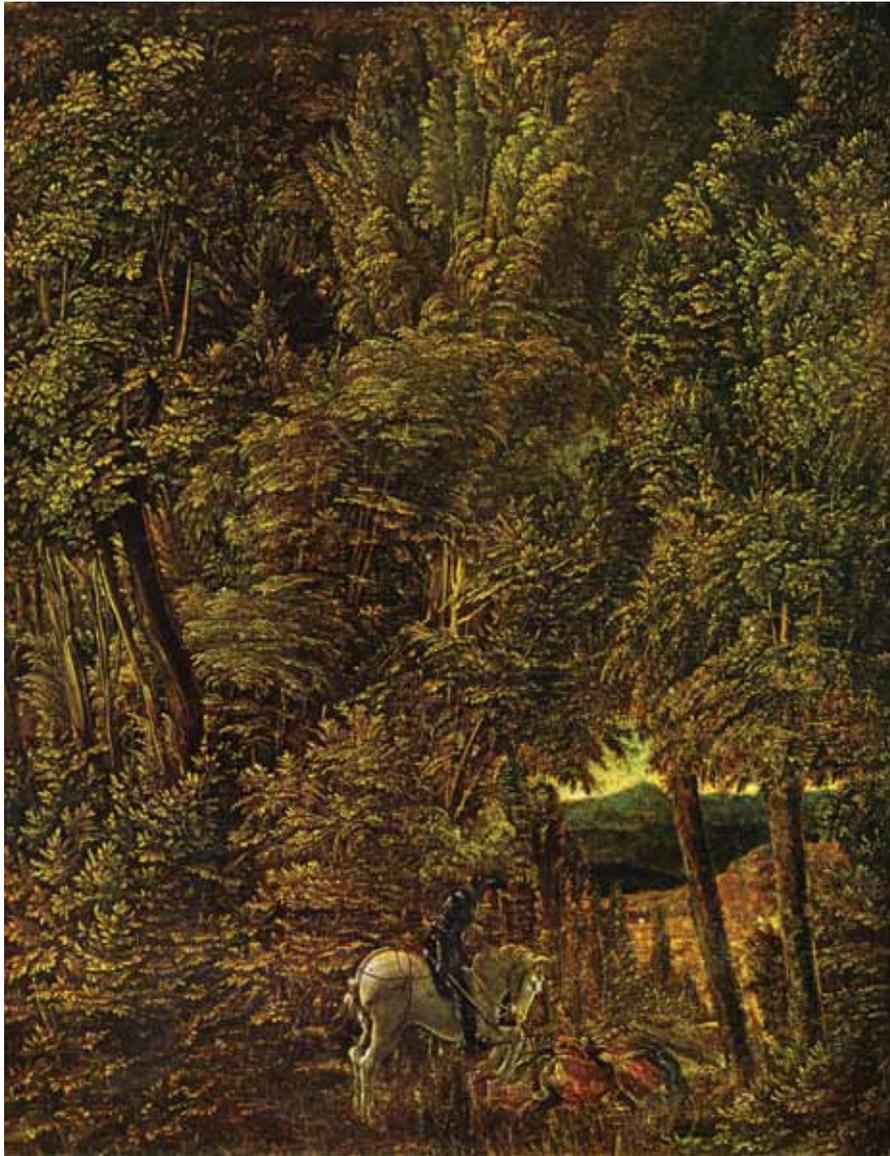
*“To be divided against Nature is to be divided against ourselves.”
Wendell Berry (In *Home Economics* 1987)*

Exploring difference

We are tribal primates, programmed to draw distinctions, and to notice how we differ from others. Looked at negatively we fear that without holding on to those dissimilarities we will sink into a greyness of homogeneity, and lose our identity. Looked at positively we revel in diversity, take delight in seeing a colourful reality which again, is defined by differences. That applies both within human society - to race, religion, gender – and without, to our view of humanity set alongside the rest of Nature.

We are attuned to difference, otherness, and contrast. Look at a creature with which you share 95% of your DNA and you will be more conscious of the differences between you and it, than the similarities, partly because we are accustomed to notice difference, and partly because the similarities we overlook all tend to be seen as givens (bodies, blood, bones, breath) – each one a set of miracles so apparently ubiquitous we barely notice them. That myopia is even more exaggerated, and darker, in how we relate to otherness in our own species: a Republican/Democrat barely notices that a Democrat/Republican is even human, and for some, the colour of the next person's skin is more significant than any other trait – if it's different from their own.

Yet we (or many of us, at least) yearn to find common ground – with our fellow men and women, and with Nature – to emphasise our family ties. By reaching out to all humanity, regardless of colour or politics, we want to celebrate our common humanity. By reaching out to the rest of Nature, we long to lose ourselves in wildness, find the wild creature within, run with the wolves.



Albrecht Altdorfer, 'St George and the Dragon', painted in 1510. An example of the mixture of horror and fascination about Nature in late medieval art.

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The world of conservation exhibits both the 'essential difference' and the 'essential commonality' mindsets, and indeed it should be a broad enough church to contain both. But there seems to me to be a confused thicket of perceptions of Nature and the wild, suffusing and confusing the statements of conservationists as much

as everyone else. That muddle isn't peculiar to conservationists – it is evidence of a dilemma at the core of being human. On the one hand, Nature is a context for human life and human consciousness: we can't be human without recognising our naturalness. And yet at the very same time we also can only be human by *contrasting* ourselves with the 'otherness' of the rest of Nature.

A confused adolescence

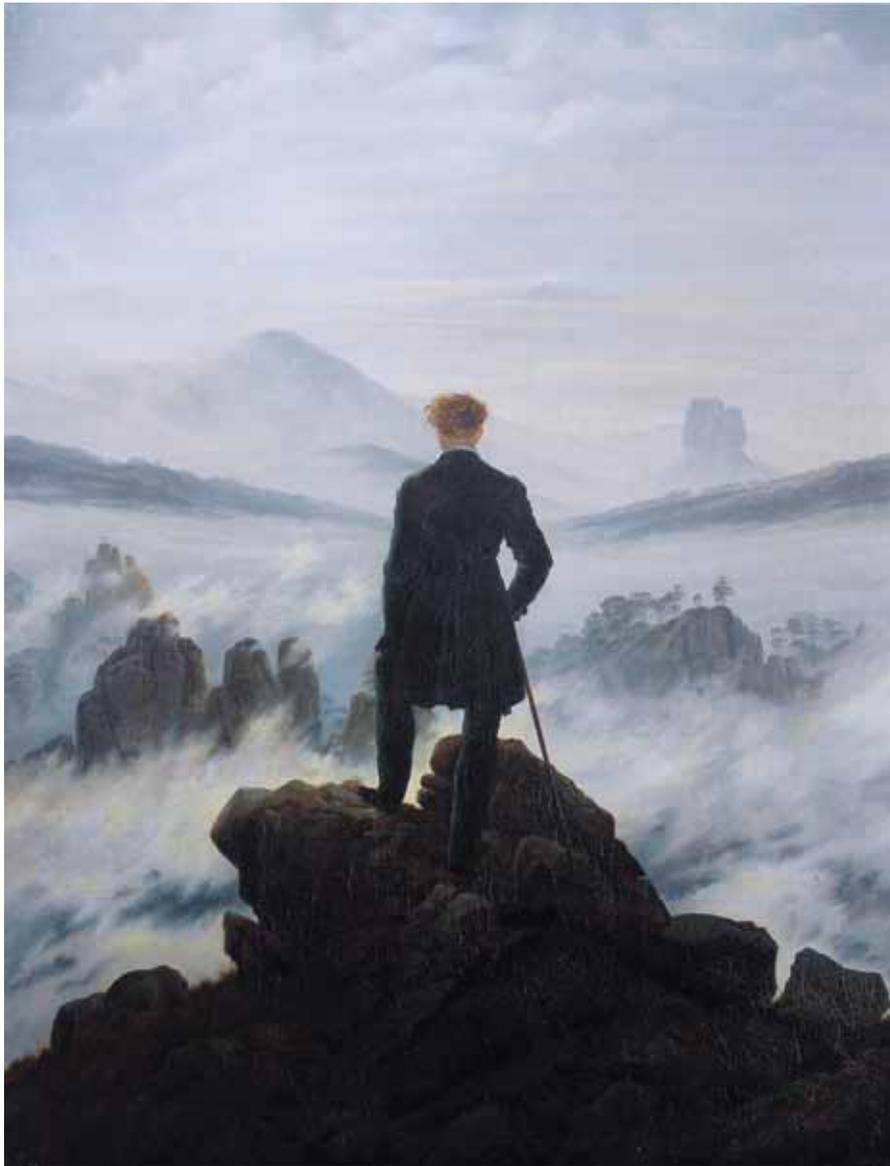
These questions of identity are hard to consider objectively because they are so deeply, historically ingrained in our culture, stretching back more than two millennia. Our current position in time and culture serves as a filter which fundamentally affects our view of the world around us.

Living at another time, we would have seen the rest of Nature very differently from how we do now. Pre-industrial tribal communities lived their lives more closely alongside the rest of wild Nature and as a result were very conscious of kinship and connection with their fellow creatures. Those creatures were their source of food, source of danger, source of competition, and also their source of imagery and, via the shamans in their midst, their connection to spirit.

Subsequently the long course of Modernism (in the sense of the loose collective historical catch-all beginning with the Renaissance, and followed by the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions), has, in many respects, been a grand project to humanise wild Nature – or at least, to try to do so. Nature came to be seen as raw material, as something to be tamed and civilized in tune with the Divine Order on the journey towards an unearthly salvation beyond this grubby physicality.

The barricaded, logic-fuelled crusade against Nature which held sway for centuries was questioned by the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century, which re-established reverence and awe for Nature, albeit viewed from a rather comfortable distance. But that counter-culture too had its risky side. It encouraged us to gaze upon Nature as the Edenic source of goodness and purity, contrasted with the fallen human character. And the seeds sown by the Romantics have given rise to the lush growth of the contemporary view of wilderness, expressed today by the many in the Rewilding movement.

Today, our cultural constructs are built partly on the Modernist world view, but partly on the Romantic backlash to it, and as a result we've inherited a rather schizophrenic attitude to the rest of Nature's family. If we conceive of modern humanity as currently being in the midst of its adolescence as a species, it perhaps becomes easier to understand this confused view. Human beings in the twenty-first century behave like teenagers in some very significant respects. They are able to do a lot of things, but perhaps lack the wisdom to do some of those things wisely. They are obsessed with newness, status and wealth. And they constantly want to assert their distance from and superiority to their parents – ie the rest of Nature – albeit secretly craving a cuddle from their mum or dad, in quiet moments of introspection and doubt. So obviously we humans see ourselves as different, just as every teenager does.



'Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog' by the German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich, c.1818.
An example of the 19th Century Romantic ideal of wild Nature.
Wikimedia Commons, open-source .

Human or natural – the wrong question?

Are human beings part of Nature, or separate from it? My own gut instinct is to say yes, I do think human beings are part of Nature. By extension, I also think that human works, like iPhones or jumbo jets, because they are made by organic,

living creatures using what at least begin as natural ingredients, are therefore also 'natural', in the strict sense. However, I clearly see that once one decides that human beings, including their 'works', are part of Nature, one quickly slides down the logical slope to the conclusion that, ergo, everything is Nature and hence nothing is. So it becomes a rather redundant notion.

But there is more to it than that. The qualities we value in wild Nature, are qualities we can carry through into our own lives and works – or choose to jettison in that transition. If we are contemptuous of the raw materials we glean from Nature, we become similarly careless about the products of those raw materials. In this sense, being 'materialistic' is not necessarily a bad thing, if you care for the wholeness of your materials. Indeed, we may be truer to our wild natures if we are materialistic than if we are cerebral and detached from the physicality of life, and of 'good work'.

Looked at another way, we are different from the rest of Nature in the same way that any species is different from all the rest – but that difference need not be seen as putting us *outside* of Nature. If we see Nature as origin, place of birth and source of our nurturing – as the etymology of the word suggests – we can see that it is impossible ever to be truly separated from our mothers. We may become distant – may never write and hardly ever even phone - but the ties still bind.

The presence of a wider natural world, like a wider family, is an important contextualisation for our own human journey. As Wendell Berry has written, "We measure ourselves against Nature, against the best of our own works and that of other creatures. If we don't, we become destructive of Nature and ourselves". However, I increasingly find myself asking whether the constant fixation by conservationists on measuring 'naturalness' and searching after 'wildness', is somehow missing the point. Rather than worrying about whether something is or isn't wild, perhaps the question we should ask instead is 'Is this good for us? Good for our place?'

Wild v Human or Better v Worse ?

I begin to think a much better yardstick for comparing human beings and doings with the 'rest' of Nature is not to judge how natural or unnatural they are, but instead to ask, simply, whether they are 'better' or 'worse' manifestations of what Nature can be - better in terms of whether they yield good outcomes - more life, healthier life, prolonged life. I think ancient woodlands and rain forests and wild mountains are 'better' (for us, and for the planet) than dustbowls and monocultures. I think Turner paintings and Ted Hughes poems and food banks and Medicins Sans Frontiers are also 'better' manifestations of Nature than Kalashnikovs or concrete or migrant traffickers or Trump. But I *don't* think that the simple fact of being human is inherently worse than the simple fact of being non-human (ie wild). That's the point. And I find myself increasingly alienated by a conservation narrative which lauds the wild and demeans the human, per se. Because I think that attitude will ultimately be self-defeating.

Defining what is good or less good involves value judgments and is not straightforward. But there are yardsticks by which to measure whether things or

actions are good. Do they promote life and health rather than death and suffering? Do they bring people together rather than drive them apart? Do they keep things fresh, diverse, vibrant? Do they find the positive rather than focus on the negative? It's not an unreasonably sweeping statement to say that wild Nature – and the best of human nature – do just that.

References and notes

I'm probably most influenced by the works of Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry for the strands of ideas that I'm trying to explore in this piece. There are too many specific sources to mention, but these two are good places to look for wise words:

Gary Snyder *The Practice of the Wild* (1990) Counterpoint

Wendell Berry *'Standing on Earth' Selected Essays* (1991), Golgonooza Press

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Engineering is not only a human trait... A cobweb at dawn in a dewy forest in Somerset .

Photo: Gavin Saunders

