

Humanity and Ecology: An Inter-Faith Philosophical Reflection

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As humans increasingly dominate in the Anthropocene epoch and become more powerful with rapid advances in technology and science, they are also seeing the consequences appear in Nature, such as global warming, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, pollution, deforestation, and violent storms. These natural disasters contribute to complex social, political, economic and health problems ... challenges that are international, since we live in a largely borderless world and share a common home, one planet – Earth.

It is imperative that we take a fresh look at how humans are connected to other species and learn how to work together to address environmental issues. For me, as a philosopher at a Catholic university in the Philippines, I am seeing how this can be done through the lens of philosophy. We need to comprehend the inter-connectedness of science and spirituality in order to achieve a new harmony. Philosophical reflection is a crucial starting point for an attempt to comprehend Nature.

Nature should be the underlying core of any academic study seeking knowledge and of any institution searching for truth, goodness, and beauty. Such reflection needs to be grounded in the core capacities of intellect, rationality, and freewill. This is reflected in the human ability to ask questions, especially as to the *why* of things. Philosophy, religion and science are interconnected, since they lead us to knowledge and wisdom. Even if there are those who dismiss aspects of these ways of knowing, we need to engage all three of them in human understanding of Nature.

Science has brought obvious benefit to humanity, from medical advances to home comforts. Likewise, since more than 80 per cent of humanity follow an established religious tradition and the remaining 20 per cent follow a code of moral conduct, we similarly see the comfort that applied philosophy has brought humanity.¹ As a result, to reach out to humanity on behalf of Nature, we must do so through these three traditions.

There is a type of knowledge that is ‘super-natural,’ which is also called *faith*. As a result, knowledge can be divided into *natural knowledge* and *supernatural knowledge*. It is through the combination of natural knowledge and supernatural knowledge that philosophers attain wisdom (*sophia*) or what the Buddhist calls ‘enlightenment.’ All wisdom is knowledge, but not all knowledge is wisdom. Wisdom is knowing the differences in things, so it is essential that we engage in philosophical reflection and dialogue to successfully inquire into humanity and ecology.

Science deals with ecology on a bio-physical level, while religion engages with it from a moral standpoint. The environment must be viewed in both the bio-physical and eco-spiritual dimensions so that we can achieve holistic awareness. Science and religion should unite to form an effective and united front, notwithstanding their differences, in order to achieve unity in diversity, so we can reach a common ground or common position with respect to the world’s ecology.

Ecological Dialogue and the Mystery of Nature

The progressive nature of knowledge and the rapid advances in science show that everything is in flux, or, as the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said: We never step in the same river twice.² Despite the differences among us, it is amazing that we are able to talk together! That is why we should trust in the process of *human encounter*. Likewise, it is our belief that it would be wise to take notice of how Nature manifests itself, and to engage with the knowledge that science and religion provide it. The pluralities of expression give us the possibility of attaining wisdom in regards to Nature.

There is much that Nature reveals, but, in order to assemble and interpret this knowledge, it requires an attention to detail. As philosopher Jacques Derrida’s said: *All we have are traces*. He refers to the ambiguity of images and the various pathways of learning.³ These traces rarely

give us a simple, comprehensive awareness and it is this complexity to which Heraclitus alludes when he said that Nature 'loves to hide.'⁴ Nature is not really hiding, but the problem is that we fail to see it as it is, the way it is, and how it operates. This illustrates how Nature and human perception is an ongoing, emerging process.

According to biologist Edward Wilson in *Consilience: Towards Unity of Knowledge*, it is just a matter of time before everything will be known.⁵ This implies that things appear to be hidden simply because humans have not yet discovered them, a premise based on the etymological meaning in the Greek word, ἐπιστήμη / episteme, one of the forms of thought outlined by Aristotle and embodied in the word *epistemology*, the process of knowledge processing. But, is it really the case that Nature is just there and that everything will be known and can be known? Or are humans just being presumptuous in claiming to have access to the full knowledge of Nature and that it is only a matter of time?

Tension of Nature and Humanity

Humans have a tendency to disregard Nature as an isolated entity that does not change. It would do well for us to question such an assumption. Humans have gained much knowledge about the universe, such as atoms and cells that build complex entities like galaxies and societies. But are we anywhere near to really knowing who we are as human beings? After all the discoveries, don't we remain somewhat of a mystery even to ourselves?

When we say that all we need is science to understand everything, we are no longer doing science but are making a philosophical claim. The question of *human agency* is perhaps one of the most challenging problems. The philosopher, Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854), saw this to be an especially difficult issue.⁶ We assume that human beings are the only entities capable of agency and imagine that Nature is just there and 'not doing anything.' But aren't we humbled by Nature again and again?

Science is noticeably important to people because it makes our existence more comfortable. Yet it is not and must not be the ultimate end of human imagination. This is why I find Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* to be such a profound literary achievement. In it, science is used for a noble goal, trying to end death, but complications arise. It is best that we ask ourselves: What sort of monster are we creating from our hubris? We are close to such a scenario today, as

AI scientists develop xenobots, robots that can reproduce themselves.⁷

Refusal to listen to Nature will lead to even more suffering. We become our own monsters. Nature is not something we created; we are instead but one part of Nature. We can relate our connection to Nature with the concept of *Goldilocks conditions*, an ideal state of being, or to what Heraclitus poetically described as 'attunement,' as for a lyre, or Aristotle's *Golden Mean*, a point between two extremes.⁸ Our challenges of existence in Nature can be constructive: They can be a call to empathy, a call for unity and harmony.

Humanity's Hubris, Filtering Reality, and Science

Hubris is a basis of many of humanity's values. It is good to have self-confidence, but we should be humble. Nature can thrive on its own without us. We need to remember the Lenten message of 'dust unto dust' along with our solar-system's origin in clouds of dust.⁹ It all starts with reflection about human finitude and nature's agency, as well as engaging with the best available science, love, and genuine concern for each other.¹⁰

We might disagree with others in the world, but we are capable of collaboration with them. Whether kings or peasants, rich or poor, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim, everyone should respect Nature and practice ecology. As physicist Max Planck said: 'An experiment is a question which science poses to nature and a measurement is the recording of nature's answer.'¹¹ Humans are rational and naturally capable of learning, but those understandings accumulate through time.

This is all complicated in today's hyper-virtual milieu, where media filters how Nature is seen and valued. It is accentuated by fake news and misguided opinion, which contributes to chaos. A big issue is how new discoveries can significantly change old interpretations and alter our view of reality and nature. We need to rely on the best available science.¹² We need science for its information and knowledge, but other social forms decide its use, from media to elections.

Think to when common people thought the Earth was flat. This is now known to be scientifically wrong, but does it make ancient people less human, less wise or incapable of having been able to live a meaningful life? Of course not. Their social wisdom and collective knowledge were still vibrant and profound. It is simply the way things are when you look at the progress of knowledge.

According to philosopher Martin Heidegger, scientific knowing is not the only kind of knowing, which implies the presence of other avenues of knowledge, such as the wisdom offered by different religions. In ancient times, such holistic concerns about the environment existed, which have resulted in many popular books about the convergence of ancient teachings with modern science.¹³

Ecology is the study of the inter-relationship between organisms and their environments. Therefore, this science approaches the fundamental Buddhist teachings about inter-connectedness and conditionality, which appear in the practice of non-violence (*ahimsa*), loving kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*) towards all forms of sentient life, including a concern for the environment.¹⁴

Likewise, Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'* [On Care for our Common Home] promotes loving and mindful care for all living beings, including the planet that we live in. He encourages all of us to have an 'ecological conversion,' such that, if we love God, we should also love one another and the environment; and he emphasizes the need to renew our ties with one another and with Nature – grounded on love, care, and respect.

According to Max Planck: 'Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of Nature. And that is because, in the last analysis, we ourselves are a part of the mystery that we are trying to solve.'¹⁵ We humans must begin within ourselves, within the small cosmos enfolded within our human consciousness, and it is imperative that we change ourselves; since, the state of one affects the state of the outer world; or, oppositely, the corruption of human acts affect the world and Nature.

For example, Mahayana Buddhism offers a way to make this change concrete through *upaya* [skillful means] applied with wisdom and compassion, which helps to realize enlightenment.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Christian Holy Bible is replete with words regarding ecology, such as in the passage: 'But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the lord. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards.' This meant that the land must be given rest.¹⁷

Comparably, the Islamic Holy Book, the *Qur'an*, is likewise filled with verses on ecology. In Chapter 2 (The Heifer) Verse 36, we read: 'The planet Earth is man's temporary home; but a secure and comfortable one; sufficient for human needs.'

It is He who produced gardens, with trellises and without, and Dates, and tilth with produce of all kinds, and olives and Pomegranates, similar and yet different; Eat of their fruit in their season, but render the dues that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered. But waste not by excess (*tasrif*): for God does not love the wasters.¹⁸

In the Hadith, the Prophet Muhammad stated: 'Do not waste water even if you were at a running stream.'¹⁹ This, in turn, was founded in the *Qur'an* verse: 'We made from water every living thing [...].'²⁰

Buddhism emphasizes the inter-connectedness of all things, that all our actions have outcomes as influenced by the law of cause and effect. What happens in the environment or surroundings, such as diseases, pollution, garbage and global warming, all directly affects human health and believing that when the Earth is sick, humanity is also sick. And, because of Karma, where humans bear the consequences of their actions; compassion and loving kindness towards nature must be practiced to help ease the suffering of Earth.

All these must begin with the self, before it is realized and practiced in the home, in different institutions, in government, and in the world. In turn, the necessity of starting change with the self is captured in the wisdom offered by many sages, such as saying that all great journey starts with the first step, with regards the answer to the question of how can we change the world? The reply means we begin with our own self that is already a microcosm in itself, before we can affect change outside of our self.

All these serve as an eye-opener to humans that at the spiritual level and consciousness, religions share common ground of universal teachings to preserve Nature and planet Earth.

The Mystical Language of Nature

Something that complicates our understanding of Nature is our use of language. Humans have a tendency to see themselves as the spokesperson for Nature, since Nature seems to be silent. We ask a tree: 'What can you say?' The tree remains silent. So we assign a value to the tree for lumber. We ask a mountain: 'What do you say?' The mountain

remains silent. So we give it value as a golf course. Is this genuine communication between humans and Nature?

Our anthropocentric era began with the Industrial Revolution and, since then, not many humans have listened to Nature. We rely heavily on our intellect and sciences that paved the way for so much technological advancement, so we see ourselves as masters of Earth, as expressed in Descartes' rationalism: 'I think, therefore I am.'²¹ That is why, when we confront 'the Other,' such as Nature, we have an 'epiphany' and can be sharply reminded of our finitude. This is a central theme of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.²²

Such an effort is not one of abstraction but experience. An extreme answer from Nature can take the form of natural disasters, such as global-warming, rising sea levels, storms, and epidemics. Without a density of plant life and the oxygen it makes, we would perish. Nonetheless, society pursues massive deforestation and destruction of marine life takes.²³ Humans must learn to learn to know Nature in a deeper way.

Genuine communication is not a monologue. The concept of deep ecology, as envisioned by naturalist Aldo Leopold, espouses the idea that Nature and human culture are not opposed – it is just necessary to respect and listen to Nature. Maybe such a dialogue would better be framed as a mystical experience, a reaction that Nature itself often evokes in people.

This was beautifully grasped by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein when he stated: 'What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence.'²⁴ The need to listen in contemplative silence to the voice of Nature brings us out of our ivory towers, our institutions, the confines of religions, disciplines, cultures and generations, and lastly, out from our hubris!

Ecological Action

Humans cannot dictate that land should produce crops in a dry season, a condition made worse by severe climate change. It is necessary for humans to listen to Nature before it is too late, because Nature now is acting differently than in the 'predictable' recent past. When Nature speaks in its own voice, as with wildfires, our initial reaction is one of shock, and we ask ourselves: 'What are we supposed to do? – This is my house, who set it on fire?!' If we are to continue to survive as a species on Earth, we need to re-interpret our view of who we are and our relationship with Nature. But how do we begin humanity's sense of responsibility to Nature?

Good intentions are not easily implemented as government action. Even the 1990 Kyoto Protocol on Ecology was not well implemented among all its member nations, which is a reason we have landed ourselves in a severe climate crisis now, with no end in sight. The solution boils down to thoughtful self-action and local engagement. Change can start with individuals, families and neighbours, as in beginning to implement the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (2015), as for clean water and sanitation. Small, realistic steps for individuals and their communities can contribute to resolving the climate crisis and its accompanying issues.

Equally important is for scientists and social and spiritual scholars to have genuine discussion founded on common values to harmonize our practices on environment that will benefit humanity. All humans must see themselves as a part of a greater whole, imperfect, but a grand work in process. Together, through our sciences and religions, all of us need to learn how deeply we need one another to create a healthy life and a peaceful planet.

Educational institutions and religious organizations also can take a lead, by transforming their schools and meeting houses into *Green Sanctuaries*, with an emphasis on environmental stewardship, from recycling, solar energy and waste reduction to composting and promoting energy efficient habits. Notwithstanding the obstacles of regulations and administration at the state, national and international levels, all have the moral duty to overcome obstacles so that individuals are allowed to play a role in environmental protection.

Conclusion

In humanity's attempt to redefine our anthropocentric view of reality; we see a need for a genuine dialogue with nature that must be anchored on concrete experience. The mission of humans is similar to what St. Ignatius of Loyola said: 'Go forth and set the world on fire!' Or as Nietzsche declares: 'I am not human, I am dynamite.' This must start at the individual level, before we may be able to realize it on higher steps, where mutual respect and understanding is promoted by both science and religion.

If an individual does anything helpful, no matter how small, with good intention, they will naturally feel happy. If everyone does the same, treating others and environment in accordance with the noble precepts of truth, goodness, charity and justice, then the Earth can improve. If, in the end, the Earth does not improve, the individual, who

has done so much, will not cry because they have done everything what they can.

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