

Ideas of Nature

One touch of nature may make the whole world kin, but usually, when we say nature, do we mean to include ourselves? I know some people would say that the other kind of nature-trees, hills, brooks, animals-has a kindly effect. But I've noticed that they then often contrast it with the world of humans and their relationships.

I begin from this ordinary problem of meaning and reference because I want this inquiry to be active, and because I intend an emphasis when I say that the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history. Like some other fundamental ideas which express mankind's vision of itself and its place in the world, 'nature' has a nominal continuity, over many centuries, but can be seen, in analysis, to be both complicated and changing, as other ideas and experiences change. I've previously attempted to analyse some comparable ideas, critically and historically. Among them were culture, society, individual, class, art, tragedy. But I'd better say at the outset that, difficult as all those ideas are, the idea of nature makes them seem comparatively simple. It has been central, over a very long period, to many different kinds of thought. Moreover it has some quite radical difficulties at the very first stages of its expression: difficulties which seem to me to persist.

Some people, when they see a word, think the first thing to do is to define it. Dictionaries are produced, and, with a show of authority no less confident because it is usually so limited in place and time, what is called a proper meaning is attached. But while it may be possible to do this, more or less satisfactorily, with certain simple names of things and effects, it is not only impossible but irrelevant in the case of more complicated ideas. What matters in them is not the proper meaning but the history and complexity of meanings: the conscious changes, or consciously different uses: and just as often those changes and differences which, masked by a nominal continuity, come to express radically different and often at first unnoticed changes in experience and history, I'd then better say at once that any reasonably complete analysis of these changes in the idea of nature would be very far beyond the scope of a lecture, but I want to try to indicate some of the main points, the general outlines, of such an analysis, and to see what effects these may have on some of our contemporary arguments and concerns.

The central point of the analysis can be expressed at once in the singular formation of the term. As I understand it, we have here a case of a definition of quality which becomes, through real usage, based on certain assumptions, a description of the world. Some of the early linguistic history is difficult to interpret, but we still have, as in the very early uses, these two very different bearings. I can perhaps illustrate them from a well-known passage in Burke:

In a state of rude nature there is no such thing as a people.... The idea of a people is the idea of a corporation, It is wholly artificial; and made, like all other legal fictions, by common agreement. What the particular nature of that agreement was, is collected from the form into which the particular society has been cast.

Perhaps *rude*, there, makes some slight difference, but what is most striking is the coexistence of that common idea, a *state of nature*, with the almost unnoticed because so habitual use of *nature*

to indicate the inherent quality of the agreement. That sense of nature as the inherent and essential quality of any particular thing is, of course, much more than accidental. Indeed there is evidence that it is historically the earliest use. In Latin one would have said *natura rerum*, keeping nature to the essential quality and adding the definition of things. But then also in Latin *natura* came to be used on its own, to express the same general meaning: the essential constitution of the world. Many of the earliest speculations about nature seem to have been in this sense physical, but with the underlying assumption that in the course of the physical inquiries one was discovering the essential, inherent and indeed immutable laws of the world. The association and then the fusion of a name for the quality with a name for the things observed has a precise history. It is a central formation of idealist thought. What was being looked for in nature was an essential principle. The multiplicity of things, and of living processes, might then be mentally organized around a single essence or principle: a nature.

Now I would not want to deny, I would prefer to emphasize, that this singular abstraction was a major advance in consciousness. But I think we have got so used to it, in a nominal continuity over more than two millennia, that we may not always realize quite all that it commits us to. A singular name for the real multiplicity of things and living processes may be held, with an effort, to be neutral, but I am sure it is very often the case that it offers, from the beginning, a dominant kind of interpretation: idealist, metaphysical, or religious. And I think this is especially apparent if we look at its subsequent history. From many early cultures we have records of what we would now call nature spirits or nature gods: beings believed to embody or direct the wind or the sea or the forest or the moon. Under the weight of Christian interpretation we are accustomed to calling these gods or spirits pagan: diverse and variable manifestations before the revelation of the one true God. But just as in religion the moment of monotheism is a critical development, so, in human responses to the physical world, is the moment of a singular Nature.

Singular, Abstracted and Personified

When Nature herself, as people learnt to say, became a goddess, a divine Mother, we had something very different from the spirits of wind and sea and forest and moon. And it is all the more striking that this singular abstracted and often personified principle, based on responses to the physical world, had of course (if the expression may be allowed) a competitor, in the singular, abstracted and personified religious being: the monotheistic God. The history of that interaction is immense. In the orthodox western medieval world a general formula was arrived at, which preserved the singularity of both: God is the first absolute, but Nature is His minister and deputy. As in many other treaties, this relationship went on being controversial. There was a long argument, preceding the revival of systematic physical inquiry-what we would now call science-as to the propriety and then the mode of this inquiry into a minister, with the obvious question of whether the ultimate sovereignty was being infringed or shown insufficient respect. It is an old argument now, but it is interesting that when it was revived in the nineteenth century, in the arguments about evolution, even men who were prepared to dispense with the first singular principle-to dispense with the idea of God- usually retained and even emphasized that other and very comparable principle: the singular and abstracted, indeed still often and in some new ways personified, Nature.

Perhaps this does not puzzle others as much as it puzzles me. But I might mention at this stage one of its evident practical effects. In some serious argument, but even more in popular controversy and in various kinds of contemporary rhetoric, we continually come across propositions of the form 'Nature is. . .', or 'Nature shows. . .', or 'Nature teaches. . .'. And what is usually apparent about what is then said is that it is selective, according to the speaker's general purpose. 'Nature is. . .' -what? Red in tooth and claw; a ruthlessly competitive struggle for existence; an extraordinary interlocking system of mutual advantage; a paradigm of interdependence and cooperation.

And 'Nature is' any one of these things according to the processes we select: the food-chain, dramatized as the shark or the tiger; the jungle of plants competing for space and light and air; or the pollinator-the bee and the butterfly-or the symbiote and the parasite; even the scavenger, the population controller, the regulator of food supplies. In what is now seen so often as the physical crisis of our world many of us follow, with close attention, the latest reports from those who are observing and qualified to observe these particular processes and effects, these creatures and things and acts and consequences. And I am prepared to believe that one or other of the consequent generalizations may be more true than the rest, may be a better way of looking at the processes in which we also are involved and on which we can be said to depend. But I am bound to say I would feel in closer touch with the real situation if the observations, made with great skill and precision, were not so speedily gathered-I mean, of course, at the level of necessary generalization-into singular statements of essential, inherent and immutable characteristics; into principles of a singular nature. I have no competence to speak directly of any of these processes, but to put it as common experience: when I hear that nature is a ruthless competitive struggle I remember the butterfly, and when I hear that it is a system of ultimate mutual advantage I remember the cyclone. Intellectual armies may charge each other repeatedly with this or that selected example; but my own inclination is to ponder the effects of the idea they share: that of a singular and essential nature, with consistent and reconcilable laws. Indeed I find myself reflecting at this point on the full meaning of what I began by saying: that the idea of nature contains an extraordinary amount of human history. What is often being argued, it seems to me, in the idea of nature is the idea of man, and this not only generally, or in ultimate ways, but the idea of man in society, indeed the ideas of kinds of societies.

For the fact that nature was made singular and abstract, and was personified, has at least this convenience: that it allows us to look, with unusual clarity, at some quite fundamental interpretations of all our experience. Nature may indeed be a single thing or a force or a principle, but then what these are has a real history. I have already mentioned Nature the minister of God. To know Nature was to know God, although there was radical controversy about the means of knowing: whether by faith, by speculation, by right reason, or by physical inquiry and experiment. But Nature the minister or deputy was preceded and has been widely succeeded by Nature the absolute monarch. This is characteristic of certain phases of fatalism, in many cultures and periods. It is not that Nature is unknowable: as subjects we know our monarch. But his powers are so great, and their exercise at times so apparently capricious, that we make no pretensions to control....