

The XXXIXth International Symposium of Eco-Ethica

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Ethics, Politics, and the Idea of Nature

The twentieth century seemed to see the human grasp of nature and hold over it expand in such a way that the world became a human habitat. Indeed, thanks to the battle against deadly disease (the massive vaccination against polio and small pox are paradigmatic examples), enormous surpluses in the food chain, and a better understanding of natural phenomena, nature itself could seemingly slip into the background, and become not a danger but a field of study, of wonder, of amusement. More exactly, this is the view that had started to prevail in the richest “occidental” societies in contrast to and, in many respects, at the expense of the other parts of the world, notably Asia and Africa. Additionally, in the wake of global pandemics, the collapse of essential species, massive forest fires, rampant pollution, the every rising threat of global warming, that confidence now seems naïve. In this context, the concept of nature in all its dimensions, as well as humanity’s place within it, presents itself as in need of reevaluation. With this in mind, the general purpose of the 39th Eco-Ethica Symposium is to open wide the discussion around the idea of nature, taking into account the diverse ways of understanding it (the plurality of interpretations) and the contradictions inherent to its content and uses (ethical, political, etc.). Possible ways to tackle this problem include:

- 1) The diversity of ways in which the idea of nature may (must) be conceived, according to:
 - the different civilizations and epochs (e.g. the concept of nature in the 18th century as opposed to that of the 21st).
 - the different kinds of approach: epistemological, ethical, technological, esthetical, anthropological, metaphysical (e.g. the problematic idea of “human nature”, etc.)
 - the concepts connected to that of nature: the concepts of “world”, “life”, “environment”, etc.
 - the specific meanings of the idea of nature, which may be understood as:
 - a “primitive given”. In this view: nature envisaged as a whole (e.g. the classic idea of a “state of nature” or the contemporary one of the “unspoiled nature”) vs. nature understood as an individual’s idiosyncrasies
 - the essence or structure of something,
 - “second nature” (*hexis, habitus*, etc.)
- 2) The socio-ethical normative implications of the idea of nature: positive (nature as a norm, for instance in Rousseau’s philosophy) or negative (nature as a given to be

transformed (for instance, in the Kantian opposition between reason and natural impulses).

The question may be treated in general terms (do we need a concept of “human nature” in order to ground a normative approach to ethics and politics? Is nature conceived as a whole [our common “habitat”] a normative concept?).

It may also be envisaged with respect to specific issues, for instance:

- the conception of education (development, formation or transformation of a person’s natural capacities, tendencies, etc.)
- the problematic notion of natural law
- the ethics of “authenticity” (the imperative of “being true to oneself”)
- gender issues
- inequalities in facing the process of ageing, diseases, etc.
- the conception of work with respect to our relation to nature, e.g. the social organization of labor understood as a defensive vs. aggressive “struggle with nature” (earthquakes, floods, pandemics, etc.).

3) The political uses of the concept of nature:

- Identification of major collective issues (the exhaustion of natural resources, etc.)
- “Ideological uses” of the concept of nature (e.g. racial or gender discrimination).

4) The tension between capitalism and the economics of growth and the limits of resources:

Growth is seen as an essential part of any theory that seeks to accord a greater share of resources, means, and horizons of action to a greater part of the population, nonetheless, the rise of theories of collapsology at the minimum shows that the overall faith in growth as an economic principle is weakening.

5) Humanity’s affective relationship to nature:

Esthetic theories of nature insist on the individual’s emotional connection to nature and the sublime, harmony, and even longing are as seen as playing central roles in the individual’s moral development. This theme may investigate the extent to which the affective relationship to nature is necessary and what the consequences of a “loss of nature” are.

This list is merely to be seen as an example of the types of questions that can be treated and in no way is to be seen as exhaustive.