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CONCEPTIONS OF NATURE IN RELIGIOUS, SCIENTIFIC AND HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: A BRIEF ANALYSIS¹

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Abstract

It is difficult to identify nature with an exact meaning. Depending on circumstances and perspectives the term “nature” has various meanings ranging from spiritual participatory to mechanistic understanding. Having these complexities and ambiguous connotations the current research tries to investigate into some conceptual understanding of nature regarding traditional ideas and modern scientific views. There will also be an endeavor to see nature from a short historical survey. The paper aims to examine

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these conceptions in the light of environmental sustainability: which understanding of nature seems better to reform the dominating attitudes of humans toward the natural environment? Being critical of conventional and secular meanings of nature, the current paper proceeds to show how an understanding of a different kind can allow humans to behave with their surroundings. In so doing, the present study wants to shed more lights on natural environment, and to add more knowledge to the present discussions of ecological equilibrium.

Keywords: Nature, Natural Phenomena, The Universe, the Objective World, Order, Power, Machine

Introduction

Modern humans are more familiar with some scientific meanings of the term “nature” compared with its spiritual value in human mind. Like instrumental perspective of nature, intrinsic and aesthetical values are also provided to nature. In traditional religious understanding, nature is seen with more aesthetical contemplation alongside its instrumental value. After renaissance humanism and scientific revolution in Europe, nature is denied its sacred feature and inherent value by modern scientists and philosophers, who have brought nature to a secular and mechanistic understanding. Thus, nature is viewed by modern humans just as a matter in motion which works like a machine. Such modern understanding of nature contradict with those of traditional religions. Again, understanding of nature among different religions are not identical. Despite this fact, religious understandings of nature show that nature is not alien to humans, rather humans are deeply related to and inherently dependent on nature. Similarly, modern biological science discloses a deep connection and interrelationship between biotic and abiotic components of natural world. In contrast to mechanistic view of nature, biology develops an organic view of nature with which spiritual understanding of nature has a connection. There is an urgent need to make a connectivity between these two perspectives in order to make humans conscious about ecological equilibrium. The more knowledge modern humans will have about such connectivity, the more awareness

they will get about sustainability of the environment; this will enable them to take necessary steps for environmental preservation and to divert their current concentrations for environmental priority. With this potentiality in hand, the present research deals with a very relevant issue in order to change current perceptions of nature and to build a positive attitude towards natural world. This paper is based on some earlier studies regarding the conceptions of nature; but these resource materials are critically analyzed to reach a justifiable conclusion. The present study aims to grow a positive attitude to the environment by developing a holistic overview of nature.

Definition of Nature

The term nature is both familiar and elusive (Soper 1995: 13). It is very familiar to us in the sense that the term is known to everyone, but it is difficult to apprehend its exact meaning. Indeed, it is an abstract word. That is why, Raymond Williams (1980: 68) remarks that the term is one of the most complex words in language (Soper 1995: 12). Similarly, in Gilkey's view, it is "a strange, ambiguous word, loaded with diverse meanings and nuances" (1993: 81). However, scholars have not ceased to search for the meaning of nature. Let us have a look on its etymological meaning. The term *nature* derives from the Latin word *nasci*, *ornator nascitura*, which usually means 'to be born', 'to spring from', 'to arise', 'to be produced', etc., (Nasr 1993: 125; Nasr 1996: 4). This etymology clearly indicates the marvelous power of nature to generate and protect uncountable forms of life (Crosby, 2002: 21). Based on these etymological meanings Crosby goes further to explain: "Nature is the creative matrix from which all things arise and to which they return, the complexity of orders and powers by which these things are upheld and by which each of them, or each type of them, attains its own peculiar attributes and capabilities" (2001:21). He views nature as the entire system of things and their interconnected relations. It is metaphysically the ultimate beyond which nothing exists (2001:21). He, furthermore, considers nature as a dynamic force, restless energy of growth, source of nurturing and productivity, and the uterus of all things (2001: 42).

Thus, Crosby's understanding of nature sounds extremely like the "Divine", or God. So, here the question arises: is nature the same as God? He does not clear it further.

Collingwood prefers to use the adjective form of nature more than to use its noun form. In his view, natural things are the things that are not artificial— things produced by the skills of human beings or other animals—, but rather that happen by themselves and not because someone has made them (1965: 29-30). It will be clearer if we look at the antonyms of the word nature. Lewis contrasts "natural" with words like "artificial", "civil", "human", "spiritual" and "supernatural" (1947:80f, cited in Fern, 2002: 11). But obviously, these adjectives have extremely different meanings, and contrast with different aspects of the term. Soper cites words like "culture", "history", "convention", etc. as opposite to the term "nature" (1995: 17). Therefore, "nature" and "natural" categorically imply those objects which are far away from being affected and modified by the application of human intelligence and skills (Linda, 1997:5). In modern European languages, "nature" is used in a collective sense for the sum of natural things (Collingwood, 1965: 43). After his deep examination of the use of the term "nature" in Western culture, Ruether (1992:5, cited in Fern, 2002: 11) discovers four distinctive meanings: (1) the very essential thing of a being (the essence or substance of a being); (2) the entire physical reality including human beings; (3) the whole physical reality without human beings; and (4) the "created" world excepting God and divine grace.

These definitions are mostly based on secular or scientific perspectives where religious views are discarded. The core difference between religious and secular views is that in religions nature is viewed as created by God, and therefore, nature is sacred; but in secular or scientific outlook nature is thought like a machine, and therefore, it is unsacred, though modern secular environmentalists have started recently to give the word a kind of sanctity to increase human respect to nature and thus, to save natural environment from anticipated destructions. However, here

the working definition of nature is taken as the whole creation, ranging from the universe to the planet earth including each and everything existing therein, which is humanly unaffected and unmodified. It is very simple but well accepted from the earlier scholars that finally “nature” includes the entire creation; so, the whole created things excepting artificial ones made by humans or animals are natural things. Even human beings themselves are also included in the definition of nature (Crosby 200:91, 114) but their own works, contributions, modifications, etc. are always kept under the category of artificiality which is always outside the category of natural things. So, there is a clear difference and demarcation line between artificial things (houses, cars, planes, etc.) and natural things (lakes, mountains, plants, animals, etc.). The human part of the world is called artificiality, which includes culture, civilization, technology, etc. while the nonhuman part of the world is called nature. Thus, “in its commonest and most fundamental sense, the term ‘nature’ refers to everything which is not human and distinguished from the work of humanity” (Soper 1995: 15). This echoes Unamuno’s view: it includes, certainly, those objects unaffected and unmodified by the application of human intelligence: mountains, plains, valleys, trees, rivers and the like (Linda 1997: 5). Here Gilkey’s interpretation seems relevant to mention: “...for both science and early religion, nature discloses itself in or through the same four categories: (1) nature as power, (2) nature as life, (3) nature as order, and (4) nature as dialectical unity of life and death” (1993: 3). He argues that these categories represent the signs of the sacred in nature and “to archaic religion these were direct manifestation, what Mircea Eliade called heirophanies², and in them nature was named as sacred” (Ibid., 87). So, for him, it appears equally at the outskirts of science and archaic religions. He further reveals that on both sides that nature has two meanings of which first one usually refers to the all-encompassing source and ground of being, including human beings. So, in this sense, nature is the widest environment equally outside us and inside us. Therefore, in archaic religion,

² The term hierophany comes from the Greek word *shieros* and *phainein* meaning “sacred appearance” (Pals 2006:201)

everything is believed to be nature including the existence of human beings.

Basic Elements of Nature and Core Components of the Natural Environment

Empedocles, first, proposed earth, water, fire and air as the four basic elements of nature. Then Aristotle added aether, which is also known as space, void, consciousness, and spirit, as the fifth element. These five elements are similarly listed in ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, and Indian culture; but ancient Chinese thought has a slightly different grouping of five elements (also known as agents, movements, phases, or processes): wood, earth, fire, metal, and water. The components of the natural environment refer to the universal natural resources and physical things or objects such as air, water, sunlight, etc. alongside the complete ecological system. The natural environment is a contrast to the human built environment, for example, houses, roads, boats, cars, etc. So, the components of the natural environment do not originate from human activity, some parts of the natural environment are, however, affected by the human built environment. The foremost component of natural environment is the earth itself which mainly consists of four spheres such as the lithosphere (rocks), the hydrosphere (water), the atmosphere (air) and biosphere (life). The earth, in terms of environment, can be divided into such two: micro-environment, i.e., the immediate local surrounding of organisms; and the macro-environment, i.e., all the physical objects (light, rainfall, soil, minerals, etc.) and biotic objects (plants, animals, micro-organisms, etc.)

Religious versus Secularist perceptions of Nature

In this regard, Kirman’s ideas (2008: 268) seem relevant. He mentions that in religious view, it is generally believed that the

natural world, including each and everything, belongs to God and it is God who has given them their purpose. Here God works as agent or actor whereas all the created substances are bound to follow His commandment. Humans are given special dignity, i.e., domination over others, but that special position is checked and balanced by divinely imposed responsibilities, like stewardship. Thus, religious views tell about the spiritual feelings and interconnectedness of all the components of nature as the creation of the Creator.

But in secular views, components of nature are usually thought as machines whose purpose is considered to meet the material needs of humans (Berry 1996 cited in Kirman 2008: 273). In the Enlightenment age, philosophers separated mind from matter, most notably in the writings of Descartes, the father of modern philosophy. Cobb categorically mentions that Descartes treated nature as machine, because nature, in his view, had no feelings or sensation (1972: 93) while in the previous centuries, before Descartes, mind and matter were considered as one substance. After matter was separated from mind, most scholars of European Enlightened period developed mechanistic view of the world supporting the supreme authority of human domination on the earth's resources. With noticeable development of science and technology, people started to get benefitted from the natural resources, so the application of religious ideas about the ingredients of nature faded from the minds of people (Nasr 1996: 4-5). Materialism as an ideology was established while spirituality or feelings for non-human animals, superhuman beings, spirits, etc. was regarded as superstitious, backward and unacceptable in public affairs. Everywhere the common mentality seems to be "let's dominate and transform nature" (Kirman, 2008: 273). In the words of Max Weber, this is a case of "disenchantment or desacralization of the world" (cited in Kirman, 2008: 273) by the secularization process. Thus, the sacred meaning and character of nature loses its application in the prevailing or common scientific and secular views (Nasr 1968; Cobb 1972:119) where both nature and humans become part of the rational-causal explanation of the universe. Even the rationalization process of secular knowledge

and scientific explanation have not kept any place for supernatural power or beings to play any role in nature (Kirman, 2008: 273). Thus, the common secular and scientific view argue that nature has no relation with the divine, rather it is independent of divine power. For both science and secularism, the realm of nature is seen merely as 'aggregates of chemical and biological elements' on which human intelligence works (Nasr 1968). Nature is not provided with any special dignity in the eye of scientific examination and experiment. In the previous view of nature, there was a place of special status where human beings had accountability to the world of nature (Nasr 1968; Cobb 1972: 39-40, 78); now nature has lost its earlier dignity, becoming less important, even valueless to some extent, due to the secular and scientific understanding of it. The secular approach to the world of nature is, thus, formed on utilitarian concept, and then, it led to culminate in a completely anthropocentric view of nature (Nasr 1968; 94, 97-98). Discarding the religious roots of world views, it claims that human fulfillment and liberation exist in the domination of the natural world. Thus, the secularization of world views facilitated by the power of science and technology has rapidly changed the previous views of nature from the human mind, removing any special divine status of nature and the responsibility of human beings to the world of nature (Collingwood 191965; McGrath 2003: 110; Nasr 1968; Cobb 1972: 93). Because of such views, modern humans developed a radical anthropocentric idea that human beings are at the center point of each and everything in the world of nature and that they are the core criterion of all values.

In the development of anthropocentricity, some scholars (Lynn White [1967] and Arnold Toynbee [1972]) consider religions, especially Judeo-Christian traditions, responsible because of their views of human domination on the earth, and for their silence on the wake of radical anthropocentric view supported by the power of science and technology. Religious scholars and theologians have already responded to this allegation explaining the Biblical statement of human domination³. For them (for example, John B. Cobb [1972];

³ For details, see Md. Abu Sayem (2021b), Philosophical Roots of our Environmental Problems, *International Journal of the Asian Philosophical Association*, 16 (2): 147-166; Md. Abu Sayem (2019), Environmental Crisis as a Religious Issue: Assessing some relevant Works and Activities on the Field, *Asian Journal of Theology*, 33(1), 127-147.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr [1976]; Bediüzzaman Said Nursi [Sayem 2021c], Md. Abu Sayem [2018; 2021a,]) religious views of anthropocentrism always are checked and balanced by human responsibility and dutifulness to the natural world. Now-a-days, secular rights groups, especially environment scholars (for instance, Holmes Roster, Peter Singer, Arne Naess and Bron Taylor) also try to reshape the secular or scientific views of nature. Some of them (Sriraj [2021]; Singh [2017], for example) are preferring to impose the term sanctity in the case of nature or the environment instead of the word sacred; the word sacred might be more religious to them than the word sanctity. Some other scholars and theorists (for instance, John Muir, Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Arne Naess, and Holms Roster) are talking about the intrinsic value of nature to save the natural environment. However, now religious and secular people, from their perspectives and approaches, are talking about the preservation, protection, and sustainability of nature and the natural world.

A Brief Survey on Historical Views of Nature

In the history of western thought, there are three sequential dominant views of nature: the ancient Greek; the Renaissance; and the Modern views. Apart from these there is also a scientific view of nature.

The Greek views of nature

In early Greek thought nature is seen as ceaseless motion with living, orderly and intelligent substance (Tilak 1977: 12; Collingwood 1965: 3-4). Heraclitus sees the ultimate essence of nature in motion or in change whereas Parmenides thinks that there must be a being without change. Both were pre-Socratic philosophers. The statement of the former does not imply the existence of God but that of the latter

suggests a supernatural being like God. At the beginning, both Plato and Aristotle were at ambivalence about whether the fundamental character of nature was change or permanence. However, in his later writings Plato sees visible things as the forms of the invisible things. For him, “the world of nature is a complex of movements or processes in space and time” (Tilak 1977: 13). He argues further that the material world is kept together by a divinity whose actions are the irreducible characteristics of matter (French 1994: 16). Aristotle explained nature from a phenomenological point of view. For him, ‘potentiality’ and ‘actuality’ are spiritual principles of being that constitute the objects of the natural world. ‘Matter’ implies what is ready; readiness is its core principle. ‘Form’, holding matter, molds it into a corporeal object, fulfilling its purpose and making it intelligible. Then the natural world comprises the total corporeal things, including the ‘substances’ as an independent existence and substances bear within themselves ‘accidental’ qualities. (Tilak 1977: 14) Thus, by such a pair of concepts like ‘matter’ and ‘form’, as well as ‘substance’ and ‘accidence’, Aristotle interprets the philosophical view of nature, though by the term nature he always means “the nature of a thing” (French 1994: 16) and in his view, “the natural world is a collection of natures of things” (French 1994: 16). His view of nature is, thus, not transcendent but rather immanent. Moreover, his explanation was dominant for the next two thousand years until the thirteenth century. However, in his idea of nature he does not clearly mention that the force or power or spirit or light behind nature is God, but it is Thomas Aquinas who appreciates and accepts Aristotle’s view of nature and then further leads it to the idea of God. His integration of the Aristotelian metaphysical interpretation into the world of theology was a great achievement. Until the time of Copernicus, this explanation of nature was the foundation of most academic disciplines.

The Renaissance Views of Nature

These views are generally seen as opposite to the Greek views. These views begin with the scientific thought of Copernicus and then it is developed further by Galileo, Telesio, Bruno and others. For them, the natural world is not an organism, it is not intelligent and living;

therefore, it is incapable of moving by itself. They explained further that movements are inserted therein from outside and all movements are generally created due to 'laws of nature'. So, to them, the natural world is like a machine instead of being an organism. It is a machine-like ground which is designed by an intelligent mind, like God, who puts together all the conditional circumstances in it for its continuous process or movement or motion. (Tilak 1977: 14)

However, it is evident that between Greek and Renaissance views there is basic difference about which Collingwood's remarks seem relevant:

Both the Greeks and Renaissance thinkers saw in the orderliness of the natural world an expression of intelligence. But, to the Greeks this intelligence was nature's own intelligence while to Renaissance thinkers it was the intelligence of something other than nature; the Divine Creator and Ruler of nature. This distinction is the key to all the main difference between Greek and Renaissance natural science. (cited in Tilak 1977: 16)

Scientific View of Nature

From roughly 1600 to 1900 we see a complete scientific picture of nature developed and formulated based on theories of Galileo and Newton. This scientific view is nicely portrayed in the words of Gilkey:

Nature was a vast, harmonious machine of matter in motion whose parts were all obedient to absolute and changeless laws. Only efficient and material, that is, physical causes are here at work; no internal purposes, conscious or unconscious, and no-self-direction are present. Thus, such views of science to nature characterize the machine 'nature' as it is in itself. (1993:87)

The Modern Views of Nature

In many ways the modern views cover both ideas of the Greek and the Renaissance having distinctive differences regarding fundamental

approaches. For Tilak, this view is still developing. However, the modern view of nature is based on a new analogy. Whereas the Greek analogy talks about “the macrocosm of nature and the microcosm of man” (Tilak 1977:17), in the Renaissance analogy nature is viewed as God’s handiwork and a machine as well. The modern view of nature is based on the analogy of processes of the natural world observed by natural scientists. The central concept of this view is the idea of evolution that the species of living organisms are of temporary types not permanent types. It also claims that according to natural laws and the natural selection process “species come into existence and cease to exist in time” (Tilak 1977:17).

As mentioned before, the modern views are still developing. Of many thinkers in this period, Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) is very famous for his view of nature according to which “... all final individual actual activities have the metaphysical character of occasions of experience” (1933: 284). For him, nature is what humans usually observe in their perception utilizing the senses (Anshen 1961: 72; Whitehead 2015: 2). His further interpretation tells that the ultimate nature of all things consists in a drive heading to the endless creation of such experiment occasions. The central point of his thought categorically indicates that nature is not “lifeless” rather it is “active”. So, in his opinion, everything that exists has its place in “the order of nature” and “this order of nature consists of actual entities”. Thus, he continues to argue that “reality is an organism”. In so doing, he does not want to confine all reality in biological terms, rather he tries to say that every existent substance appears like a living organism in the sense that its essence depends on its components as well as on its structures equally. Thus, he defines organism as the component of the activities where substance and activity are converted into a single entity. Then he argues that nature is not only organism but also process. Furthermore, he claims that “nature is process and process is a reality in nature”. (Tilak 1977:20-21). In this way, Whitehead’s view of nature addresses all different periods of Western thought about nature, ranging from the ancient Greek period to the modern period. He himself confesses that over the centuries western philosophy

consists only of different commentaries on and explanations of Plato.

Concluding Remarks

From the preceding discussion, it becomes explicit to us that nature is the macrocosm of the whole cosmos where humans are only its microcosm. For monotheists, it may be seen as the system of God through which He conducts the whole creation. In a narrow sense, natural environment means our surroundings including trees, animals, lakes, rivers, seas, mountains, air, etc. All these natural phenomena are essential not only for the existence of human beings, but also for the whole animal and plant worlds. It does not necessarily mean that all these natural phenomena have only instrumental value for the life of humans and animals, but rather these components of natural world have instrumental, aesthetic, and intrinsic values (Vromans 2012). This implies that the natural world should not be abused or misused by human actions, but rather it should be treated in a just way so that the animal and plant species can get its basic requirements from the natural environment, and we should keep it managed to provide these essential materials equally for the coming generations in the same way it gives us at present.

Over the centuries, nature has been viewed in different ways and philosophical thoughts. However, according to Greek views nature has something of a sacred status but this status was removed during the renaissance thought supported by science (Nasr 1968) and since then it continues through Enlightenment, Romantic and Modern period to Postmodern period. Now nature is understood like a machine. Such a view of nature is strengthened by the scientific revolution and secular philosophy and policy of the scientific worldview. In the modern and postmodern worlds, religions are thought as void for providing guidance in state policies or world views; that is religious institutions and faith-based organizations could not raise a strong voice against the current flow which is always being supported by scientific approach and secular view. Religious institutions are also responsible to some extent for being silent to the continuous degradation of the environment because of unlimited human greed and limitless consumption of natural

resources; and religions have anthropocentric view of nature, i.e., human domination of nature, because of which some scholars also see religions as responsible for the ecological crisis. White (1967: 1206) and Cobb (1972: 34) clearly mention that anthropocentric view of Christianity was responsible for the historical roots of ecological crisis, though both of them confess that in Christianity there are guidelines and the legacy of Saint Francis of Assisi for protecting the natural world, then they suggest revitalizing those guidelines to be followed (Nasr 1968; Cobb 1972). However, the religious anthropocentric view of nature or human domination of nature seems to be balanced by the religious imperatives such as the concept of stewardship (in Christianity) or trustee (equivalent to Islamic term *amanah*) that instructs humans to behave responsibly with nature as a *khalifah* in the case of Islam and image of God in the case of Christianity.

What is now needed is that religious people should come forward and raise their voices in the greater interest of our natural environment and then to work together with other non-religious groups of people for preservation of the natural environment and try to make people convinced for justly behaving with the natural world. It is high time to rethink the value of nature and to modify human actions to keep the natural world safe and sustainable, otherwise not only our own existence but rather the whole living forms on the planet will be lost.

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