# THE UNNATURAL SIDE OF NATURE

**by Rafael Holmberg**

When we think of nature, it seems clear that we think of something self-evident and easily defined, such as biological processes, geology, physical particles, DNA structures – in other words, the material reality of the world that is independent of any subjective interpretation, independent of any moral or ethical valuation, or, in short, of any 'cultural' perspective. When we think of nature, in other words, it is easy to insist on the definition of nature provided by the early French sociologist Émile Durkheim: *nature is what is left behind or overcome in order to achieve civilisation and culture*. But a second glance suggests a precariousness in this neat distinction between the natural world and its cultural counterpart. Epigenetics, for example, shows us that these same natural DNA structures find their expression by depending on cultural contexts, and that certain cultural factors, in turn, influence and arrange the 'natural' structure of DNA. The same disturbance in the line separating culture and nature emerges where we think of recent neuropsychological work on frontal lobe functioning. Frontal lobe neurons are not independent of any subjective or human functions, but rather *exist* only in accordance with these cultural functions: the structures of these neurons are radically dependent on external, social priorities such as attention, watching for social cues, or mediating interpersonal relationships. If we remove these purely cultural contexts, we also simultaneously lose their natural (neuronal or biological) counterpart, where neurons are structured *only* insofar as they are applied to cultural requirements.

Psychology as a discipline has profited from this malleability between what we consider cultural and what we consider natural. The 'mind', or at least the concept of the mind, has undergone a breathtaking acrobatic shift in terms of the methods by which we appreciate it today. The mind was, in earlier rationalist and idealist contexts, a transcendent, if not divine, function. It was seen as the dimension of human existence which endlessly avoided being reduced to concrete, natural processes. And yet the emergence of an empirical approach to the mind in the 20th century via scientific psychology has definitively inverted this vision of the mind as non-natural: with the development of neuroscience and biopsychology, the mind is viewed as the natural product of a complex neuronal system, the 'conscious' experience of a homeostatic biological system. However, with the simultaneous

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Nordlys i Bossekop den 6te Januar 1839.

birth of psychoanalysis, the mind and its unconscious dimension was once again seen to be irreducible to its natural functioning, but was instead forced by Freud to reflect a contradictory and repressive origin of human behaviour, which he claimed could only be attributed to the 'discontent' produced by culture. Even quantum physics makes the unnerving and paradoxical claim that (natural) subatomic particles are re-structured by perspective, or by the way in which they are measured.

In these instances, nature appears 'open' to culture, or to make sense only insofar as it is received and formatted according to a uniquely human perspective. We are right to insist on natural processes, on a reality that is independent of any cultural form of expression. And yet, as I will argue, we cannot ignore the tendency by which these same natural processes fail to be coherently distinguished from their opposite, cultural side. Whatever nature is, it certainly has a volatile tendency. As the literary critic Terry Eagleton has argued, this instability is a central feature of what we call culture:

> Culture is a functionally variable term, in the sense that what may be cultural in one context may not be so in another. [...] Drinking alcohol is a cultural affair, but it would cease to be so if it was the only way of quenching an intolerable thirst. Survivors of an air crash in some remote terrain who break open the drinks locker are not having a party. [...] You may wear a head-dress in Qatar as a badge of your cultural identity, but also to avoid getting sunstroke.

Eagleton is very right to point out that cultural practices often toe the line between natural and unnatural, although he does not make the corollary

argument (which I am making) that *nature itself* usually fails to be registered as natural. It is not that there is no such thing as nature – psychology, physics, geology, chemistry, biology etc. all point towards the definitive existence of something outside of culture, to the existence of a natural world. Rather, what I would like to focus on is our persistent tendency to misunderstand what is truly meant by the natural, or rather that nature frequently expresses itself in a decisively cultural sense.

## NATURE IS ALWAYS MARKED WITH THE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE FROM WHICH WE IMAGINE IT TO BE SEPARATE

This volatility of nature becomes even more apparent if we think of something like homosexuality. As is very well known, homosexuality was until recently considered deeply unnatural, even by the American Psychological Association. It was seen as a deviation from the biological function of sexuality, which was nothing more than the function of reproduction. And yet psychological research from the previous decades (research today avowed by the APA) suggests the inverse: homosexuality is unquestionably natural, entirely accountable for by anatomical and neurochemical variations in brain functioning. We are therefore confronted with two confident and opposing assertions on the 'natural' dimension of sexuality: as serving human reproduction or as neuro-anatomically justified. In this sense, homosexuality is rendered at one and the same time natural and unnatural. (It is worth noting that with the dawn of psychoanalysis, *all* sexuality became viewed as perverse and divorced from nature.)

The same problem of what we consider to be natural can be transposed onto the sociological level with the question of intergroup mixing, i.e. the mixing of racially or culturally distinct groups of people. From a nationalistic viewpoint, the mixing of social and cultural groups is inherently unnatural – it corrupts the independent development of a particular identity and interrupts the natural development of a race. From an evolutionary perspective, on the other hand, intergroup mixing produced for a broad genetic exchange that allowed us to adapt to natural constraints. In other words, from this perspective the same process of intergroup mixing is deeply natural.

These examples merely intend to suggest a certain problem that emerges whenever we categorise something as natural or unnatural: something can appear to be both natural and unnatural. What I suggest in this essay is that there is an unavoidable contingency to the idea of nature, or that nature is always marked with the cultural perspective from which we imagine it to be separate. In other words, and to return to my opening sentence, when we think of nature, it is hard to admit that we are *truly* thinking of nature itself.

But this is not a new problem. For centuries, philosophers have struggled with what to do about nature, and whether nature 'by itself' (without the mediation of how culture relates to nature) carries any meaning at all for us. It is worth pointing to some of these forms of philosophical ambivalence on the topic of nature in order to better understand the historical difficulty with which nature has been juxtaposed to culture.

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In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel observes that when artistic creations (most frequently poetry) refer to nature, it is an entirely empty and self-defeating reference. Aesthetic pursuits, for Hegel, are a method for Spirit (the collective agency or self-consciousness of culture) to form a relation to itself, often by unusual, experimental, and sometimes even self-alienating creations. The main point is that art is the expression of culture's relation to itself, as well as an expression of what it fails to or succeeds in recognising about itself. Nature, on the other hand, is the non-subjective state from which Spirit and culture emerge, and from which they inevitably become separated. Hegel's critique of poetic references to nature is rooted in the idea that whilst nature indeed *exists*, the nature which Spirit speaks of is already coloured by the intention which Spirit attributes to it. The nature present in aesthetics is not nature by itself – nor can it ever be a pure form of nature – because it is tainted

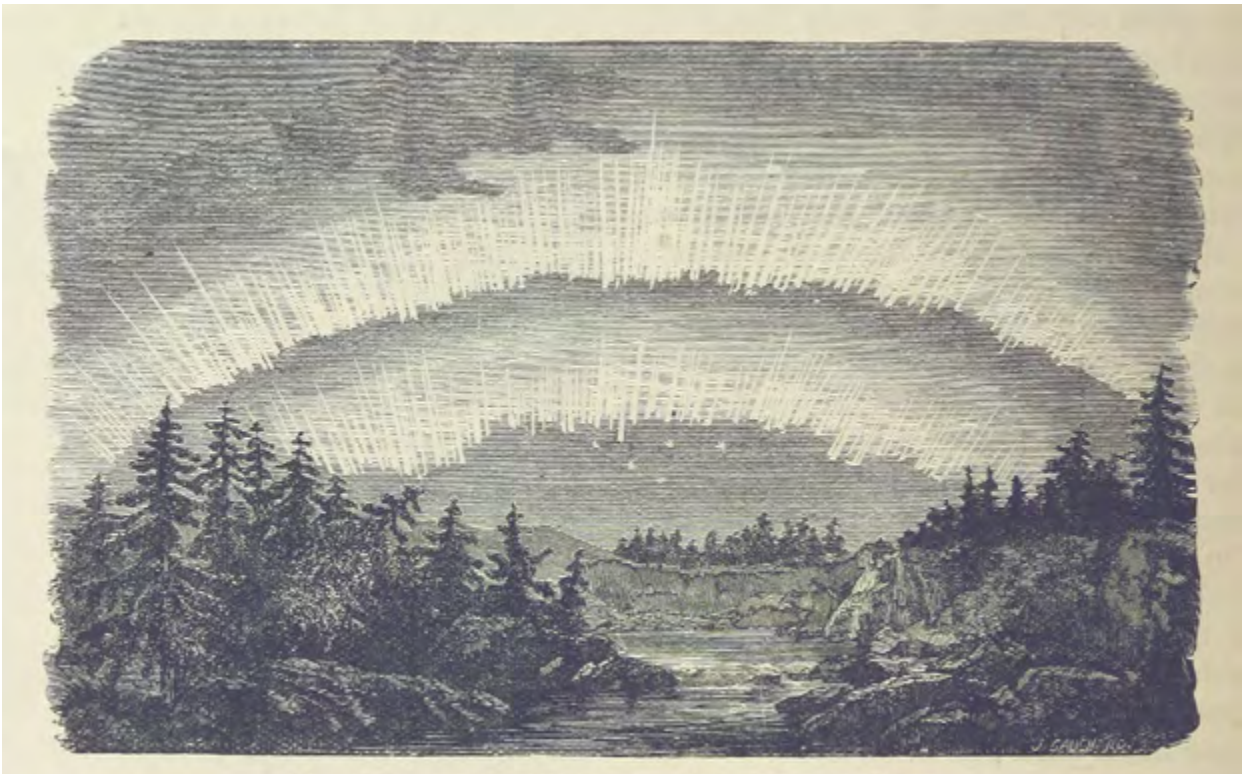

Fig. 233.—DOUBLE-ARCHED AURORA WITH STREAMERS.

by a cultural perspective that *by definition* can only exist insofar as it has removed itself from any natural origin.

Other prominent figures of 19th century philosophy would share a similar problematic relation to the idea of nature. F. H. Bradley, for example, made the bold argument that nature is a mere appearance, and not fundamentally real. As provocative as this sounds, Bradley's argument was similar to the one I made above, resting on the fact that nature is very malleable in its definition, and that it inevitably comes to depend on the political or aesthetic premises that define what we mean by nature. Hegel's contemporary, Schelling, made the even more controversial argument that nature *only* exists insofar as it can be expressed for human subjectivity to reason about it – without our perspective, nature itself disappears.

For Schopenhauer, the reality behind appearances – the Kantian thing-in-itself – is rendered as the human will or drive. With this trade-off (from inaccessible noumena to an identifiable, nameable quality of the will), even the thing *behind* human or subjective appearances is turned into a subjectively defined feature: our will or drive. In other words, the absolute exteriority of the natural world, from which the human perspective is barred, gets reappropriated into the will of humanity itself. Schopenhauer's greatest follower and greatest critic, Nietzsche, would make a similar trade-off. Not only in *Human, All Too Human*, but in *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche depicts an inherently constructed – i.e. culturally formatted – aspect to our natural origins, or to the remaining instincts of these origins. For example, the instincts for survival, for status, or for domination take on a very unusual form in advanced industrial societies: survival is not merely biological or natural reproduction, but the preservation of a cultural legacy. Domination is not merely the biological notion of physical domination to attract a partner,

but ideological and cultural domination by influence rather than direct physical confrontation. In other words, the Nietzschean use of natural instinct becomes deeply fettered to modern cultural concerns. With these philosophers, it seems that the inner essence of nature is inescapably cultural.

## NATURE MAY PRECEDE CULTURE, BUT THIS CERTAINLY DOES NOT GUARANTEE THAT WE WILL REFLECT ON IT NEUTRALLY

The difficulty of separating between the natural and the cultural has not simplified as we move into 21st century philosophy, as evidenced by the recent intervention of "speculative realism". Some proponents of this movement, such as Graham Harman, make a seemingly straightforward argument that we have failed to consider natural objects for themselves, outside of subjective relations. Harman's argument, put briefly, is that we have limited the essence and experience of objects to *our* (the subject's) experience of these objects, and in so doing have obscured the fact that objects also relate to *other* objects by revealing and concealing an inexhaustible set of properties: in relation to a book, the table is an obstacle preventing it from falling to the floor, yet in relation to a fire, a book is a flammable object. The properties of the book are very differently expressed in relation to the table compared to the fire. No relations between natural objects ever exhaust the multiple possible meanings that any one object can have to another object. Other proponents of speculative realism, most notoriously Quentin Meillassoux, make a more critical accusation: we refuse to consider *being* without the additional factor of *thinking*. Put in more convenient terms, philosophy since Kant has, according to Meillassoux, insisted on correlating natural existence with our subjective *representation* of this existence, and has thereby denied natural existence any autonomy outside of culture. With Meillassoux's claim, philosophy launches a scathing inquisition into itself, suggesting that we have failed to think about nature in any genuine sense for the last 250 years.

But, as already noted, the question is not about whether nature exists outside of human or cultural reception. Rather, the question is about the difficulties that arise *once* culture itself emerges. It would be very hard to deny that there is such a thing as nature or natural processes. Even if we were to suggest that a tree which falls when nobody is around *did not* make a sound, it would be odd to deny that there was a tree or even a forest in the first place. Natural objects exist even if we are not there to observe them. The problem that biology, physics, and biopsychology instead present us with is that human representation and culture infuses nature with what it sees in it. In other words, nature is no longer *just* nature once it is contemplated from the cultural perspective. Nature may precede culture, but this certainly does not guarantee that we will reflect on it neutrally. These various examples mainly serve to suggest a simple point: that philosophy has for a long time either covertly or overtly struggled with neatly separating the natural from the cultural. Whatever we consider the obverse of culture – nature, as I am using it here following a long philosophical tradition – is seemingly self-contradictory. Nature indeed exists, but by all measures – from speculative idealism to neurobiology – it appears deeply unstable, and is permitted to be known by culture only by being simultaneously obscured.

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Direct philosophical concerns aside, the most pressing aspect of this very strange status of nature is the climate crisis. Most of us are more than aware of the desperate ecological state inflamed by human industry, and of the global climate destruction of which we are only beginning to see the first effects. Few climate scientists doubt that freak weather occurrences including storms, floodings, hurricanes, droughts, or forest fires are above all natural, and very *real*, events. The climate crisis is the definitive statement *against* any cultural relativism – it would be almost impossible to suggest that this crisis points towards nothing more than a problem within culture. Put simply, the ecological disaster over the horizon is certainly a *real* problem. If we were to ask a climate

scientist whether this crisis really is a crisis relating to nature, we would receive a resounding *yes*.

But this is not an essay on climate science. It is rather a reflection on the apparent ineffectiveness of climate science in the public sphere. Public and popular behaviour rarely, if ever, reflects the genuinely dire state of the ecological problem expressed by climate scientists. My argument is that this ineffectiveness cannot be separated from the inconsistency with which we treat the idea of nature itself. We are unable to apprehend nature by itself without injecting it with an unnatural factor, or without an aspect of cultural relativising. What I am concerned with is not so much the scientific knowledge of the climate catastrophe, but the persistent 'culturation' of this natural knowledge.

As a recent example of this, we need only look at the recent wildfires in Los Angeles. Prior to these, most natural disasters had a geographical and economic component: they primarily affected third-world countries and poorer communities. In other words, they upheld Niall Fergusson's claim in his 2021 book, *Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe*, that any natural disaster is at the same time an economic disaster, insofar as it takes an economically unstable network to allow natural incidents to grow to truly disastrous proportions. With the LA wildfires, however, an exception arose. The people afflicted were elites of American culture: actors, directors, and millionaires, who seemed exempt from the cultural and economic instability which seems to fuel ecological catastrophes. We are reminded of the almost (yet unintentionally) satirical remark of one Sky News reporter during the Valencia floodings of late-2024: "these things don't usually happen here". In other words, an arrogance persisted that natural disasters do not happen in economically prosperous areas.

Even though it seemed, with the LA fires, that nature and the reality of the climate crisis was making itself clear, the same prejudice analysed by centuries of philosophy reared its head: this natural disaster was reconstructed as a problem of culture. Rather than recognising a natural ecological threat, Republicans almost unanimously blamed Democratic politics for the fire. Their reasoning was that DEI hiring policies implemented by Californian Democrats had led to an excess of women in local fire stations, and since women are less effective in dealing with fires than men, LA had burned down as a consequence. As absurd as this reasoning is, it nonetheless reflects a tendency to frame nature in cultural terms which is evident on both sides of the political spectrum. Not only do we still notice traces of Western, leftist spiritualism, anthropomorphising nature and claiming that 'she is reclaiming her territory from us', but climate scepticism is viewed by the left as one part of a larger conservative constellation. This constellation generally includes pro-life, low taxation, anti-diversity, free-market, or traditionalist stances. Rather than being recognised as an overarching problem that is irreducible to political preferences, the climate is therefore reduced to one part amongst many in a struggle by progressive parties against a right-wing turn in European and US politics.

## PUBLIC AND POPULAR BEHAVIOUR RARELY, IF EVER, REFLECTS THE GENUINELY DIRE STATE OF THE ECOLOGICAL PROBLEM EXPRESSED BY CLIMATE SCIENTISTS

The paradox I am insisting on is straightforward yet odd: where it seems that the forces of nature are most aggressively stressed, they are simultaneously most easily reformatted as cultural, political, and subjective problems. We have seen this with categories such as homosexuality. We have even seen it with the subjective appropriation of what we consider to be profoundly natural (DNA or quantum particles). We have also seen this tendency of an endless exchange between culture and nature, or the recognition of something as simultaneously cultural *and* natural, in the history of philosophy. Today, however, it takes on its most troubling manifestation.

It is very easy to assume that scientific unanimity will be followed by personal or popular agreement. The natural ecological facts are clear enough, but as we have all too often seen, nature is easily appropriated, is almost immediately presented as a cultural

discrepancy. In the very moment of comprehending nature, we very easily miscomprehend it. In other words, what is natural can just as easily be cultural, and the climate crisis is no exception.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres was therefore worryingly correct when, during a 2024 meeting of Pacific Island leaders, he suggested that the scale of the ecological crisis was "unimaginable". It is not only unimaginable in the sense that we cannot know the future consequences of the climate catastrophe, but also in the sense that we ultimately fail to recognise, or imagine, this natural threat without altering and diluting it.

## WHERE IT SEEMS THAT THE FORCES OF NATURE ARE MOST AGGRESSIVELY STRESSED, THEY ARE SIMULTANEOUSLY MOST EASILY REFORMATTED AS CULTURAL, POLITICAL, AND SUBJECTIVE PROBLEMS

Humanity certainly has a collective problem to confront with global warming, but an important component is the problem of our understanding of nature itself. What I want to suggest by this essay is something that is generally not considered by ecological policy and climate science: subjective reasoning, and even culture itself, has a persistent tendency to misinterpret nature. As the history of philosophy, as well as the historical meaning of what we consider "natural", suggests, it would be arrogant to assume that this prejudice no longer applies today. If we are able to confront the malleability and inconsistency which colour the notion of nature and culture, we can only be better situated to understand the profound gap between climate science and public behaviour. Ecology is a very serious threat, and the natural processes underlying climate change cannot be disputed. But the difficult problem – a problem that recent psychoanalytic theorists such as Alenka Zupančič have touched on – is that this scientific certainty does not neatly correlate with popular thought. To confront this, we have to confront the paradox inherent to the idea of nature itself.