

Nature assembly

Today is the first day of COP 26. The news has never been more focused upon climate change and the needs of the natural world. Landscapes either seem to be melting or burning. Humanity's relationship with nature is a focus as never before. That is as true of this school as anywhere else. So this morning I'd like to take this central topic - humanity's relationship with nature – and consider it in more depth. It is perhaps the most important question of our times.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the relationship is very clear. The Old Testament has Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, in a state of bliss prior to their fall. Man is seen as the steward of God's creation. Adam gets to name all the creatures. He and Eve live lives that are intertwined with the natural world – they are in blissful alignment with it, albeit that they are in charge of it for God. The Islamic tradition is very similar, although Eve is called Hawwa and the two eat from the Tree of Immortality rather than the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This religious idea that knowing about Good and Evil separates Adam and Eve from God and excludes them from their primal unity with nature is interesting. They will now be making their own decisions on how to act. That means that their connection with God's will is broken. This independence of mind also means that they cannot be at one with nature either, as natural objects and animals make no moral decisions.

So religious tradition is our first reference point in working out what man's relationship with nature should be. A myth that contains some very deep thoughts about the relationships between man, God and nature.

Of course, we can't stop there. Many other thinkers have wrestled with the question as well. I'd like to pause over two – Spinoza and Schopenhauer – who had some profound insights but came to very different conclusions. Spinoza was a Dutch philosopher who lived in the middle of the 17th Century. He was a brilliant and radical thinker – his ideas were the foundation of the Enlightenment but made him something of an outcast in his own time. For Spinoza, there is no difference between God and the natural world around us. Nature quite literally *is* God, and vice versa. That means that the world and universe around us is the unfolding of God's nature, in accordance with natural laws that represent God's essential nature. God or nature is vastly greater than any of us – it is far beyond any human power of understanding. It has infinite attributes unknown and unknowable to us. We are not special, but we are also part of God or nature as it (he/she?) changes and develops. Because we quite literally are a part of God, and God is perfect, all that happens to us is as it should be. Nature, as a form of God, cannot be otherwise and is as good as it is possible to be. For Spinoza, man's relationship with nature is the same as his relationship with God.

But if Spinoza thought nature was good, Schopenhauer begged to disagree. He started with the thought that our senses – the way we understand and perceive the world - are limited. What we know of the natural world is not the world as it really is, but a representation of it. The world as it really is must be something much bigger than what we can know, and very different. Schopenhauer asked himself what creatures of the natural world have in common, as that would be an indication of the underlying reality. He saw creatures that lived by eating other creatures, who were driven by desires and suffering. Creatures that could not stop from striving until the moment of their death. He decided that beneath the natural world we see, hear, smell and so forth, is actually an insatiable primal urge he called the Will, but which meant something more like *desire, striving, wanting, effort, and urging*. It is because of this Will, the true nature of all existence, that humans live lives of suffering. Desire causes this suffering. Schopenhauer, quite on his own, arrived at a point of view similar to Buddhism.

Like Buddhist thinkers, Schopenhauer presents a pessimistic picture of life in which unfulfilled desires are painful, and pleasure is merely the sensation experienced at the instant one such pain is removed. However, most desires are never fulfilled, and those that are fulfilled are instantly replaced by more unfulfilled ones. Further, the unending cycle of eat and be eaten demonstrates a natural world full of horror and pain.

How can two such intelligent philosophers arrive at such radically different views on the same natural world around them? For Spinoza, nature and God are the same and are perfectly good. For Schopenhauer, nature is the expression of a terrible desire, which causes unceasing misery. Although very different, it is not impossible to reconcile the viewpoints.

We can look at animals and plants at the level of the species. Here we see a beautifully intricate network of subtle relationships. Each species is reliant upon others and the whole ecosystem maintains an exquisite balance, at least until man comes along and disrupts it. The natural world is a thing of beauty and perfection, a network of linked and supportive relationships perfectly poised for the maximal good of every species within it. That is the species level perspective.

Now look at the level of individual plants and creatures. Here the picture is very different. The balance achieved at species level is founded upon an everyday experience of struggle and survival. Each individual animal or plant must fight for everything it needs for survival. They are in an unending battle for the limited resources around them. It all must end in tragedy for each individual living thing. Their painful existence will soon end as each becomes a resource for another living thing to devour or use. Pretty pessimistic, but it's the same natural world as we considered before.

Perspective matters. When we look at nature, what we get depends upon what we bring to it. The brilliant and unusual American poet, e e cummings had his own view on this. Here is a poem:

maggie and milly and molly and may
went down to the beach(to play one day)

and maggie discovered a shell that sang
so sweetly she couldn't remember her troubles,and

milly befriended a stranded star
whose rays five languid fingers were;

and molly was chased by a horrible thing
which raced sideways while blowing bubbles:and

may came home with a smooth round stone
as small as a world and as large as alone.

For whatever we lose(like a you or a me)
it's always ourselves we find in the sea

Maggie and Milly and Molly and May all discovered their inner selves on that beach. Their experience of nature and their emotional reaction to it was a product of their own personalities and opinions.

Here we might find an answer to the question that we began with and which has haunted us throughout this assembly. What should the relationship be between humanity and nature? Is it stewardship for God? Is it a place of divine perfection because nature is God and man's relationship with nature is to be a small part of the unravelling of God's own purposes for himself? Is nature a place of primal horror and suffering?

My answer is this: all of the above. Nature is a mirror to what we bring to it. When we ask what our relationship with nature should be, we are really asking what our relationship with ourselves should be. Are we challenging and exploitative, or nurturing and caring? Are we part of the whole, or a small destructive element of it? Whatever we say the natural world is, we are making the same statement about ourselves. A healthy human wishes to be caring, supportive and supported, integrated into a greater whole, mindful and sensitive. If that is the case, those same words apply equally to our relationship with the world beyond ourselves – the natural world. A world that we need in order to survive ourselves.