

Nature is problematic.

And more so, because few realize why it is such a problem or indeed that it may be a problem at all. Few even ponder what is meant—truly meant--by the word. And herein lies the first trouble. I, for one, remain puzzled by what exactly a person might mean when they profess to “love nature,” or to “enjoy nature,” or even strive to “protect nature.” If asked to explain, such a person may expand: “you know, nature! The trees, the plants, the forests. Nature!” And so from this we might conclude that by nature what is meant are plants. But this, generally speaking, is not *precisely* what they mean.

Thus, I press further: “And what about birds? Are birds part of nature?” “Well yes, of course! And bugs, and fish, and deer. You know, nature!” “And mountains? And rivers?” “Yes, yes, all of that. Now you've got it.” Here, they may also be wondering, how silly of you to ask such an obvious question, for we all know what nature is. But if I am honest, I most sincerely do not understand the word. In fact, I dislike it. It unsettles me. Because to me, the word nature is a problem.

So if I were to inquire yet further – if nature means forests, and animals, and mountains, and rivers, and all of these things – what is nature *not*? Is a skyscraper nature? Is a road? What about a human? And what about a housecat? Is she nature? “No, no, no. Those aren't nature at all. Have you never been outdoors? Have you never been camping?”

And here is the crux of what I find so problematic about this societal idea of “nature,” this everyday word, this philosophized, much-celebrated, much-beloved (and sometimes much put-upon) construct.

Nature is meant to be pristine places, to mean wild places. Or so we may conclude, from its colloquial usage. Natural places, of course. Plants and animals. That is what most people mean when the word nature is thrown around. So what is truly meant by “nature”, I have been left to gather, is really: “not human.” And that is something very problematic indeed.

Because I have yet to find this place called nature. For I guess that if it is a place, it is one that exists only in human fantasy and not in reality. While each person may have their own variations on what they feel they mean by the word nature, almost infallibly humans are excluded. Which is very troublesome.

So here is my problem with nature: it is a concept only. An idealization. A misconception. And it is dangerous, because we have been given no place in it, though we are given the word from an early age. Because by using such a word, we (usually unintentionally and subconsciously) draw two worlds: the non-human, and the human. Generally speaking, we consider humans not only *not* to be a part of this thing called “nature”, but when they become tangled up with it, with some part of “nature”, it frequently ceases to *be* “nature.” A farmer may say differently, but a hiker is likely to say that here is a corn field, but over there, there is a prairie, *there* is nature. Worse yet, our presence seems even to *pollute* this pure construct called “nature,” wherever it may be and whatever it is.

So on the surface, this word seems good and green and straightforward. Something we all understand. Yet in my mind, it should cause pause; moreover, it is all the more troubling that it is assumed to be so straightforward, that of course we all know what “nature” is, and somehow, intrinsically, subconsciously, we imply that we are separate from it. For I know of only one world, and only one earth. And I know that I am very much a part of it. I think that it is dangerous that this word, “nature”, has become such a truly fundamental concept for so many. Not only in common language, but often in ecological and environmental discourse as well. Among people who should know better.

We have, as a society, equated the “natural world” with things that are green and growing, and in so doing made ourselves *unnatural*. Few would call a city “nature”, or a concrete building. They might not even consider the trees lining their streets to be “nature”, at least not in its *pure* form. That is a city tree, after all. It is not in a forest, where nature is. There is no nature in a city.

But what a lie that is! For I am *not* unnatural. Nor am I alien to this planet, or to this existence. I am a human. I am an animal. I am a living, growing thing. I am matter. I am a part of this earth, and inseparable from it. Where, after all, did I come from but the stuff of this earth?

What is more, we *will* fail to protect the earth, our home, if we continue to delineate it, with “nature” over there, and we humans over here – only taking brief visits to “nature” and returning at the end of the day to our home in “not nature.” What nonsense is this?

This is why, when I speak of the land, and the trees, and the plants, and the animals, I do not call that “nature.” If I wish to speak of these things, I say so directly.

“But how can you dislike nature?” I might be asked. Because: I do not love nature. I do not know what that is.

But I do love the earth. I know what that is, and where to find it, for it is all around. I love all that which inhabits this earth and all that is upon it and all that is – and this means humans as well. And it means plants, and it means birds, it means insects, it means bears, and it means mice, and it means rivers, and water, and grains of sand too. All of these things, I am, and all of these things are me as well. The same for you. For we are all interconnected.

We cannot extract ourselves from the earth, and live alone and apart in our construct. That is firstly impossible, even should we continue to deceive ourselves, but it is secondly self-damaging. We assume that, by virtue of our humanness, our presence is to pollute and corrupt or to progress, if you will. All that we are is counter to all that is “nature”; that what is human is counter to the rest of the earth. Which is preposterous. A great, preposterous, lie. With a number of consequences.

For one, it is depressing. Should I, for being a human, consider myself not to fit with other organisms? Should I consider myself to be toxic to my home?

I, personally, do not think that my existence on this earth is a bad thing. Nor is it a good thing. It is how it is. I can cause harm to what we might call an ecosystem, for example. That does not mean that I embody harm. Nor does any other human. Though our actions may frequently cause ecological degradation, if we are not careful, that does not mean that we are, inherently, toxic. It does not mean that we are, inherently, bad. And it does not mean that *not*-human things are, inherently, more pure and goodly.

Furthermore, when we equate humanness – when we equate ourselves with *un*-nature, – and create this dichotomy, we fall into even further trouble when we attempt to protect our earth. Because we fundamentally misunderstand that the earth does not end over there, where that road begins, or where that city begins, or where a person's yard begins. We draw such and such line in the air, and believe it to be a matter-of-fact border. We create two worlds. And we only need to be careful with the “natural” world, or so we say. We need to make sure that we are restoring forests, and cleaning up rivers, and saving wildlife. That is environmentalism. That is sustainability. That is ecology.

Most certainly not, I say! If we are to talk of environmentalism, or sustainability, or ecological responsibility, we must remember our interconnectedness: our one earth, our one home. Restoring a forest will do little good if our cities continue to pollute – if our cities, homes, farms are left unhealthy, and we focus only on “natural” ecosystems. A city is just as much of an ecosystem as any other ecological community, all of which are tied together as if by invisible thread. Sometimes very subtly. Likewise, we must take care of our bodies just as much as any other organism or ecosystem, for as we are stuff of the earth, its health is also our own.

And so: please, before you speak to me of “nature”, I urge you to ponder what *really* and *truly* it is that you mean. Because to claim that you love “nature” means, to me, that you very likely are not seeing beyond fiction, and pretty pictures. And you imply a great many things, which you may not intend. And which we may all, someday, regret.