MAJOR WESTERN VIEWS OF NATURE

Hebrew Bible

Divergent, even conflicting views

1. *Spiritual value beyond the natural world*
   - Creator God is separate from and transcends nature.
   - Religious worship should be directed to the Creator.
   - Humans are a special creation: they are the only part of creation that are created in God’s image.
   - Humans are given “dominion” over nature.

2. *The spiritual value of creation*
   - God made creation and called it good (before humans were created).
   - Creation manifests God’s glory and is alive and responsive to God.
   - Humans are a creature of God along with all other species.
   - God cares for all of creation, which is God’s, not the possession of humans.
   - Humans are given the duty of stewardship, protecting God’s creation.

Ancient Greek Philosophy

Plato (ca. 400 b.c.), Aristotle (ca. 350 b.c.e.), and Neo-Platonism (3rd century c.e.).

- Plato and Neo-Platonism clearly placed highest spiritual value on a transcendent world and devalued the natural world.
- Aristotle assumed that nature was essentially good and continuous with spiritual reality. However, he too espoused a form of “transcendental dualism.”

Transcendental Dualism

“*Dualism*”: binary split into two. “*Transcendental*”: one of the two is higher and is related to transcendental reality.

- There are two realms of reality: the natural world, and a transcendental world, which has highest spiritual reality.
- Human nature is dualistic: mind versus body, reason versus emotions, with mind and reason corresponding to the transcendental realm, the body and emotions part of the natural world.
- Social dualism: sex and race showed same dualism: men (associated with mind and reason) higher than women (associated with body and emotions).
- Nature-culture dualism: Culture is associated with mind, males, and the transcendent. Nature is associated with body, females, and is inferior to culture.
- Domestic and tame animals are superior to wild animals.

“It is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and the mind and the rational element over the passionate, is natural and expedient; whereas equality of the two or the rule of the inferior is always hurtful. The same holds good of animals in relation to men; for tame animals have a better nature than wild, and all tame animals are better off when they are ruled by man; for then they are preserved. Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind.”

--Aristotle, *Politics*
Medieval views of nature

“Organicism”
- Nature has an inherent vitality of its own: *anima mundi*.
- Different things in nature interacted like organs in a body.
- The natural and supernatural realms can interact (magic).
- Hierarchical view of cosmos and of society (feudalism).

Nature as book
Late Medieval period up to 18th century.
- Nature is God’s creation.
- Nature is orderly and intelligible.
- Thus creation tells us about God. To understand the mind of the Creator, we can “read” his “book.”
- Nature has value as God’s creation and as a medium to learn about God, but does not have truly inherent spiritual value in and of itself.

Nature as chaotic “wilderness”
Associated particularly with early Protestant John Calvin (1509-1564) and Puritanism.
- A fallen world of nature: when Adam fell from Grace, his world also fell – from a Garden of Eden to a contaminated place.
- Nature is chaotic, disorderly, ever-changing without pattern or predictability.
- Therefore nature is not intelligible and is dangerous.
- We need either to wall out the wilderness, or conquer and tame it and turn it into a Garden based on human spiritual design and control.

The Enlightenment
Particularly the 18th century. Germany (Kant), France (Voltaire), England (Hume), the U.S. (Thomas Jefferson), but continuing today.
- A response against medieval faith, “superstition,” religious wars, and witch hunts.
- Associated with humanism, rationalism, & science.
- Optimistic concerning knowledge (reason & science), society (movement toward democracy & away from monarchy), material well being (allied with scientific and technological advances).
- Nature is orderly, acting according to natural “laws,” and works like a clock (“mechanism”).
- We can understand natural laws through science and reason, which are the surest sources of knowledge.
- The knowledge we gain is not limited to individuals, particular circumstances, or social groups: it is objective and universal.
- Our scientific knowledge enables us to have power over nature and manipulate it for our benefit.

Romanticism
Especially 1750-1870, but continuing today.
- In part a reaction against the rationalism and mechanism of the Enlightenment.
- Nature has high value. It is either a direct manifestation of spiritual reality, or has its own spiritual value.
There is a close correspondence between the natural world and human nature.
Reason is suspect. The goal is not abstract knowledge but communion. The world is more complex and fluid: intuition, emotions, & the contemplation of beauty have particular value.
The arts are particularly valued as a medium for representing the spiritual dimension of reality and expressing sensitive experience of it.
Social vision: simpler, pastoral lifestyles close to nature are superior to the nightmare of urban technology.
The “Sublime” is prized: the awe-inspiring majesty of nature, which suggests its spiritual dimension and our place but our smallness within it.

“Conservationism”
Not our general term of conserving nature, but a specific philosophy of resource management.
Began in Europe in the eighteenth century, a form of the Enlightenment’s rational search for order, progress, and material well-being.
Championed around 1900 in the U.S. by Gifford Pinchot, the “father of American forestry.”
For Pinchot three are main options:
- nature could be left unused and thus wasted;
- it could be ruthlessly exploited and used up, leaving nothing for future generations;
- or it could be managed for greater efficiency and long-term productivity.
The third option is necessary for economic prosperity and as the only moral stance concerning future generation.
“Anthropocentric”: nature’s value is only found in its use for us. By itself, it has no moral or spiritual value in itself. Nature is something to be controlled, managed, and consumed by humans. Nature unused by humans is a waste.
This is the dominant view in American forestry.

“Preservationism”
Championed by John Muir (1838-1914), Wisconsin-born California nature writer.
Proposed as an alternative to the anthropocentric conservationism of Pinchot.
“Biocentric”: nature has intrinsic value. The ideal is to preserve nature as it is for its own sake.
The proper human “use” of nature is aesthetic and spiritual, which ideally leaves nature undisturbed.