

# Nature Beyond Dualism

*By Claire Larroque*

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**Modernity has been built on the idea of a fundamental divide between nature and culture, humans and non-humans, the world and the spirit. These distinctions are no longer viable, as shown by an interdisciplinary and collectively authored book.**

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*Les Natures en question*, directed by Philippe Descola, Paris, Éditions Odile Jacob, October, 2018, 336 p., 26,90 €.

Nature assumes a multitude of meanings: spaces that have escaped anthropization, beings without consciousness or language, an organism's principle of being and identity, or again the domain of regularities independent of human actions. As such, nature has long formed the primary pole in a series of conceptual oppositions constituting certain bases of European thought: nature/culture, nature/art, nature/spirit, nature/history, natural/supernatural. Yet "all these contrasting definitions that give nature its mysterious unity" (*Introduction*, p. 8) have been questioned in recent decades by numerous studies casting further doubt upon the relevance and generality of these categories. This is the "great divide" between nature and culture, in which the former signifies a universal nomological regularity and the latter a contingency of the uses of the world, a world which is disappearing.

If in fact “nature isn’t what it used to be” (p. 7), how do we define it? Where is the idea of nature today? Have nature’s boundaries been totally eroded or do certain fundamental discontinuities between humans and non-humans persist? Directed by Philippe Descola, anthropologist and professor at the Collège de France, chair of the Anthropology of Nature, *Les Natures en Question* brings together the papers from the Collège de France’s October 2017 conference. Mixing life sciences and social sciences, sciences of matter, philosophy, and the humanities, this book offers an interdisciplinary reflection on the many questions brought up by the blurring of boundaries between the natural and the human. It is both exacting and erudite. Within their specific disciplines, the papers attempt to shed light on “the complex relationships between physical phenomena and the way in which humans act upon those phenomena, are influenced by them and imagine them.» (*Introduction*, p. 12).

## **The emergence of the singular notion of nature in European thought**

In the logic of Buddhist idealism, “the world-vessel can only be a projection of the human mind” (Jean-Noël Robert, “L’éveil de la nature dans le bouddhisme sino-japonais : comment plantes et pierres deviennent bouddhas,” [“The Awakening of Nature in Sino-Japanese Buddhism: How Plants and Stones Become Buddhas”] p. 43). The relationship between the animate and inanimate worlds, that of the spirit and its setting are but two aspects of the same reality. Japanese Buddhism’s idea of a soul in non-humans does not allow for stable boundaries between the spiritual world, the material world, and the human world. This idea of nature seems fairly far removed from the Greek concept of *phusis* designating a domain of regularities independent of human actions.

The ancient Chinese also had no concept equivalent to *phusis* but nonetheless grasped the regularities of phenomena. The study of nature was broken up into particular specialties. It was never conceived of as a single, overarching domain of

inquiry as it was in Greece.<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Lloyd, historian of Ancient Science and Medicine, wonders therefore if the concept of phusis, given how it traced a new line of demarcation from the human world<sup>2</sup>, didn't initiate a powerful upswing of "naturalist ontology." In doing so, he contradicts the ontological schemata put forth by Philippe Descola.<sup>3</sup> In fact, according to Descola's classification, naturalism is the typical ontology of modern and contemporary Europe which separates the human from the animal. It establishes a radical division between nature and culture and consists of making nature an autonomous object that human beings can master and possess.

According to the historian Etienne Anheim, the emergence of the Western naturalist ontology (or movement of naturalization of the West) clearly happened in the Middle Ages. The historian cites several examples: highly organized forms of agricultural exploitation, dam building, policies for hydraulic management, and development of mines and quarries. He reminds us that "the progress in archaeology of the environment in the last three decades (...) "has shown the early onset of anthropization in medieval Europe. ("Les métamorphoses de la nature dans l'Europe de la fin du Moyen-Âge," ["The Metamorphoses of Nature in Late Medieval Europe] p. 55). " For all that, this is no simplistic reading.<sup>4</sup> He shows quite well how that relationship to the world did not lead directly our own, that is to say an autonomous world, dominated and exploited by humankind : "Otherwise how do we explain that

1 "Chinese experts in the various disciplines of course asserted their advanced learning, not as experts in "nature" per se, but rather in the study of heavenly structures (*tian wen*) for one, and for another, mathematics (*shu shu*), or yet again in agriculture," Geoffrey Lloyd, "Phusis/natura/nature : origines et ambivalences," [Phusis/Natura/Nature: origins and ambivalences"] p. 24

2 "After all, the Greek had anticipated the idea that there is but a single matter, or matters, of which all things are made," Geoffrey Lloyd, p. 30.

3 Philippe Descola's anthropological work consists of finding, the world over, radically differing conceptions that different peoples have been able to form and the relationships between humans and nature (ontologies) as well as establishing a classification of the latter. Four categories emerge: naturalism, animism, totemism, and analogism. For P. Descola, the ancient Greeks adopted an analogistic system in which physicality and interiority are discontinuous from one creature to another, but linked by networks of analogies and correspondences. On the contrary, naturalism is characterized by the hypothesis that physicality is continuous between humans and animals (we're made of the same material) while our interiority is discontinuous (only humans have a culture), see P. Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005.

4 Evoking the famous article by Lynn White on the Christian origins of the modern ecological crisis, the author criticizes a simplistic reading which consists in envisioning that medieval Christian society might have borne the embryo of modern naturalization, « to which it would have given birth by linear evolution, progressive detaching man from a primitive relationship with a wild and pristine nature," *Ibid.*, p. 52-53.

the natural world does not exist either in iconography or in literary descriptions, and does not even have a lexical designation?"

According to him, the meticulous analysis of texts from this time period allows for elaborating a reflexive knowledge from the vernacular relationship of a community to its environment. In this way we can closely grasp the progressive implementation of naturalist ontology in the European world. For example, in the 1330s the Count of Provence organized an inquest through administrative districts,<sup>5</sup> in order to take stock of his rights and possessions. This contributed to the "creation of paper regions" representing the environment in documented form. Such measures were widespread in medieval society and a multitude of local procedures progressively shaped the relations between humans and non-humans. They constitute valuable elements for understanding the movement of naturalization of the West. This process did not at all end with the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century but in fact continued along with it. If Francis Bacon's utopia of the mastery and domination of nature began at this period, the new naturalist system cohabited on a long-term basis with other ontologies in Europe such as analogism<sup>6</sup> or animism.<sup>7</sup> "The animist system is compatible with naturalistic practices [...] Precious gems fascinated the European courts. Considered as both luxury objects and subjects of mineralogical study, diamonds were lent medicinal virtues due to their evaporation by sunlight or fire. This constitutes a fairly convincing example of the continuity of the late alchemical tradition in the eighteenth century." (*ibid.*). Thus, if naturalist ontology did become established in seventeenth-century Europe "over and above uniformity, what dominates is the image of a naturalist palimpsest" (p. 86).

5 For this inquest, inhabitants dependent on the count came forth declaring the lands they farmed, whether it was wheat fields or vineyards or fields for husbandry, so that each parcel was "localized, described, alongside its type of agriculture and the type of taxes weighing on it, with the help of measures and place names,-" *Ibid.*, p. 56.

6 Analogisms, according to Ph. Descola's classification, is based on a discontinuity between interiorities and physicalities. Humans, like non-humans, are divided into different categories, from both a mental and physical point of view. Learned thought therefore endeavors to restore an order, a coherence, notably through similarities and hierarchies.

7 Animism conceives of a resemblance of interiorities and a difference of physicalities between humans and non-humans (animals, vegetables, spirits, objects). Animals and plants thus have the same interiority (emotions, conscience, desires, memory, aptitude to communicate) as humans. They are different only by their bodies and thus also by their mores.

## Human Natures

The idea of nature has not only performed the function of crystallizing the emergence and development of the sciences, it has also exerted a central influence in putting into place a theory of human nature. Justin E. H. Smith shows how the European model of human nature was systematically developed when confronted with otherness. The analysis of the West's discovery of American civilizations sheds light precisely on the clash between two ethnocentrism, or two ontological systems: "The absolute and crushing nature of the conquest prevents us from considering the fact that at the same time there had also been a perspective on Europeans, that Americans wondered about the nature of these strangers. These kinds of questions were inspired by their own commitments to non-universal ontologies ("Le naturel et l'inné : une perspective historique sur la diversité raciale," ["The Natural and the Inborn: a historical perspective on racial diversity"] p. 172 ). Consequently, one of the effects of the emergence of naturalist ontology was to conceive of the human person on the model of universal regularities that had long remained exceptional with regard to the rest of humanity. Moreover, would it not be preferable to speak of "human natures?" The way in which human nature had been formulated in Europe was also quite different from the way in which it had been developed in ancient China. In a profound analysis of the word *xing*, Anne Cheng, chair of the Department of the Intellectual History of China at the College de France, shows that the idea of human nature had been thought of from the point of view of energies, in which a hydraulic metaphor dominated. *Xing*, far from designating "human nature" speaks more of a way of peak human functioning, at its most complete and its healthiest, in the same way as the function of water is to flow toward the bottom: "The question is not to know where the line of demarcation between nature and culture is placed, or between human and non-human, but to start at a base notion of energy, and to know if this energy is intrinsically good in the sense of whether it allows for the perpetuation of life"(p. 197).

If the notion of "human nature" has allowed us to constitute human beings as the only legal subjects,<sup>8</sup> François Ost ("Personnaliser la nature, pour elle-même,

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that humans have not all been legal subjects across the board (the status of slaves), as a result, if the concept of legal subject is an abstract category that does not shift across time, its substance does however become modified.

vraiment ?” [“Personalizing nature, for itself, really?]) shows how giving legal personhood to nature, in the current context of anthropization of nature and the defense of the environment can itself upset these lines of demarcation and encourage us to take a closer look at them. Must personhood necessarily be a requirement to be a legal subject? The philosopher cites several recent examples in which legal institutions have given rights to a personalized concept of nature: “In 2008 for the first time the inscription into the Constitution of Ecuador of nature as a legal personality (article 10) and the granting of various legal rights to Pacha Mama (Mother Earth);” “the granting of legal personality to two rivers, the Gange and the Yamuna, by the Supreme Court of the State of Uttarakhand in India, 20 March, 2017;” or yet again “the legal granting of personhood to the third river of New Zealand, the Whanganui, by virtue of the law adopted by the Parliament of New Zealand, also on 20 March 2017” (p. 216). F. Ost emphasizes the constraints of granting personhood to nature by showing, among other things, how this does not necessarily result in rulings favorable to it as opposed to other rights claimed by other legal subjects. <sup>9</sup> For Marie-Angèle Hermitte (“Artificialisation de la nature et droit(s) du vivant,” [Artificialization of nature and the right(s) of the living]) the profound transformation in the study of legal subjects introduces instead the possibility of treating non-humans as beings with rights. In this respect, she asks if the contemporary legal order as a whole is not influenced by a form of “animism” (p. 265). The study of the evolution of the rights of the living thus questions the boundaries of the natural domain. The growing vagueness of its status invites us to look with new eyes at the relationships between humans and non-humans

## **Humans and non-humans: pondering the collectives**

Thus, for Philippe Descola, to make the observation of the historically contingent character of naturalist ontology allows us to see anew the divide between the natural and the social that this ontology conveys. Frédéric Keck (“Laisser vivre les

<sup>9</sup> The sole fact of granting nature personhood as well as rights does not necessarily protect it, insofar as its rights must cohabit with more classic rights of property and free enterprise.

sentinelles. Transformations de la biopolitique par les chasseurs de virus,” [“Letting the Sentinels Live: Biopolicy Transformations by Virus Hunters”]) analyzes health monitoring techniques and more specifically sentinel animals.<sup>10</sup> Putting forth the difficulty of conceiving a clear line of demarcation between the human world and the natural world, he shows how these measures enlist the skills developed by both breeders and hunters for managing the uncertainty of relationships with non-humans. These measures also blur the line between the wild and the domesticated: “How do we live at the right distance from sentinels? If emergent viruses cross the threshold between species, chicken sentinels will be in an intermediate position between humans, who would not be vaccinated against an illness not yet communicated to man, and the other chickens, vaccinated against an illness endemic to poultry. And since vaccination is today one of the hallmarks of domestication, a non-vaccinated chicken is closer to a wild bird, exposed to the mutations of a dangerous virus” (p. 144). Thus we examine new techniques of producing and repairing life that biology, medicine, and biochemistry have managed to develop. This examination also upsets how we grasp definitions of the human, the natural, the artificial, and mechanisms of living things and the social rules of their appropriation.<sup>11</sup>

What do we make of this new division in which humans and non-humans are no longer subject to well-separated systems of description and explanation? Doesn't that bring in a kind of relativism? Far from defending any hyper-relativism, on the contrary, P. Descola (“De la Nature universelle aux natures singulières : quelles leçons pour l'analyse des cultures?” [“From Universal Nature to Singular Natures: What Lessons For the Analysis of Cultures?”]) promotes the adjustment of analytical tools which would allow for passing from a uniform world ordered by a major division between nature and cultures to diversified worlds in which humans and non-humans constitute a multitude of assemblies. Abandoning our naturalist schemata of analysis would allow us to better decipher these relationships to the world. It would then be easier to understand that when indigenous communities defend a volcano in the Andes threatened by a mining company, it is not a question either of childish or

10 The sentinel is defined as an animal chosen in its environment or placed deliberately in an environment and followed over time so as to detect early, qualitatively or quantitatively, exposure to a given pathogen, specifically any that are naturally contagious to man.

11 See the following two papers : Alain Fischer, “La médecine face à la nature, un combat acceptable ?” [“Medicine confronting nature, an acceptable combat?”] p. 285-304 ; Clément Sanchez : “Mieux comprendre la nature pour créer de nouveaux matériaux,” [“Better understanding nature in order to create new materials”] p. 305-324.

folkloric superstition, nor a desire to protect a resource. It is, rather, in the defense of a “member in full of the mixed collective of which humans form a part, with the mountains, the flocks, the lakes, and the potato fields” (p. 134). A change of perspective like this might then “offer something to think about as regards the transformation of our own political institutions” (p. 126) insofar as we could then imagine relationships to the world from a “collective<sup>12</sup>” angle. “It’s not human individuals that constitute political subjects, nor even the autonomous assemblies in which beings of each species associate with their fellows so as to exist in a sovereign manner. No, the real political subjects are the *relationships* between the collectives.” (p. 133).

“Nature is not what it used to be.” It is no matter of nostalgia, but of mourning the representations and uses of nature in Western thought. If the concept of nature is declining, it is to better find again the existence of “connections to the world” and of “collectives” whose value is as theoretical as it is practical. The way to the new understanding is borne by the notions of “relations.” Given the diversity of the domains gathered together, this work is demanding reading but it offers many avenues for imagining the relations between human and non-human collectives in order to ‘entirely rethink political action and living together in a world where nature and society are no longer irremediably divided” (p. 135).

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12 “A stabilized form of association between beings that can be ontologically homogeneous or heterogeneous, of which both the principles of composition and the modes of relationship of the components are specifiable and apt to be approached reflexively by the human members of these assemblies, p. 131