

## **On natures and human nature.**

### **Ethics, aesthetics, ecologies**

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#### **The vision**

According to Raymond Williams (1980), the term nature is “a case of a definition of [a] quality which becomes, through real usage, based on certain assumptions, a description of the world”.

What is most striking in the linguistic history of the term nature is the coexistence of that common idea, a state of nature, with the almost unnoticed, because so habitual, use of nature to indicate the inherent and essential quality of any particular thing [which] is, of course, much more than accidental. Indeed there is evidence that it is historically the earliest use. In Latin one would have said *natura rerum*, keeping nature to the essential quality and adding the definition of things. But then also in Latin *natura* came to be used on its own, to express the same general meaning: the essential constitution of the world. [...] The multiplicity of things, and of living processes, might then be mentally organized around a single essence or principle: a nature (p.68).

This “singular abstraction” becomes “a nominal continuity over more than two millennia” so pervasive “that we may not always realize quite all that it commits us to. A singular name for the real multiplicity of things and living processes may be held, with an effort, to be neutral, but I am sure it is very often the case that it offers, from the beginning, a dominant kind of interpretation: idealist,



metaphysical, or religious” (p. 69), each of which has a specific historical and cultural context.

The aim of this special section is to focus on the interpretation of this “singular abstraction” through the diverse lenses proposed by the contributions to the international conference *Natures and Human Nature. Ethics, aesthetics, ecologies. A comparative approach*, organized by Viviana Toro Matuk and Salima Cure in April 2024. The conference was designed as an occasion for reflecting from different disciplinary perspectives on the possibility of using the analytical tools of British anthropologist Mary Douglas’s Cultural Theory to lay the foundations for comparative research. Scholars of social and cultural anthropology, bioethics, cultural studies, psychology and biology contributed with presentations of ethnographic cases and theoretical reflections.

Organizing the conference represented what the Murui indigenous population calls *hacer amanecer* or giving concrete form to an idea (Salima Cure, personal communication, October 31, 2024). Among the Fula of Guinea-Bissau, the figure of the visionary plays an important role in the community and is a person who has the ability to see what others cannot see. They have the ability to perceive dangers and warn in advance people who might be affected by them. This protective function is fundamental, as it helps prevent people from falling into traps set by sorcerers or other malicious individuals. The visionary acts as a guardian of the community, using their powers of perception to protect others from invisible dangers.

The work presented in each of the papers in this special section resonates with that function. Ecological vision is the capacity to detect the traps inscribed in our dominant conceptualisations of nature, whether in the idea of the dualism of nature and culture or in the anthropocentric assumption that non-human beings exist primarily as resources. To exercise vision is to recognise dangers before they become irreversible but also to recognise openings: relational, epistemological, and ethical pathways toward alternative interpretations and possible futures.

### **The Cultural Theory framework**

The conference aimed to explore the various ways in which humans perceive, interact with, and comprehend nature, both as a physical environment and as a symbolic concept. It also sought to examine from different perspectives human behaviour in relation to different forms of social organisation and modern institutions responsible for environmental protection.

The nature versus culture dichotomy and the cultural origins of this dichotomy are focal points of numerous anthropological studies. In this respect, various diverse and complementary perspectives challenge Eurocentric notions of subjectivity by offering an alternative viewpoint on the relationship between humans and nature. Descola (2005) proposes a fourfold classification of the relations between human beings and nature: animism, totemism, naturalism, and analogism. Ingold (2019; 2020) emphasizes the significance of comprehending nature by using the notion of lines. Nature is depicted as a dynamic and interconnected continuum of processes, movements, and relationships. The significance of lived experience in comprehending and constructing the natural world is paramount. Moreover, Ingold underlines the fundamental connections and interdependencies between culture and nature, challenging the idea that they are different from one another. Viveiros de Castro (1998) posits that within Amerindian cultures, subjectivity and consciousness are discernible in both human and non-human entities.

The conference situated the question of natures and human nature within the conceptual framework of Cultural Theory (Douglas, 1970), with particular regard to the ongoing discourse surrounding global warming and the multiple environmental changes resulting from human activities. Cultural Theory is a comparative approach based on the idea that there exist different ways individuals relate to society, forming different cosmologies, which can be synthesised within four cultural types. Douglas et al. (2003) assert that it is conceivable that a finite number of fundamental forms of social organisation could be identified, from which a vast array of ultimate forms of social and cultural existence could emerge. According to Cultural Theory four primary methods of organising, perceiving, and justifying social relations, also referred to as “ways of life” or “social solidarity”, exist: 1. Fatalism 2. Equality 3. Hierarchy 4. Individualism (Table 1). These forms of social solidarity imply distinct versions of “nature” and of “human nature”.

Douglas and Ney (1998) point out how such configurations, or ways of looking at the environment, often also correspond to specific ways of understanding human nature, combining the themes of ethics (values and behaviours valued towards the non-human), aesthetics (sensitive appreciation of the world) and ecology (cosmological view related to nature). From situated and specific ethnographic cases in different historical and cultural contexts, it is possible to find a shared explanatory model that is able to shed light on contemporary cultural biases regarding the relations between humans and non-humans.

**Table 1.** Cultural Theory methods of organising, perceiving, and justifying social relations

<p><b>INDIVIDUALISM</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Perception of nature as benevolent and robust.</li> <li>- Human beings are driven by self-interest and atomistic tendencies.</li> <li>- Faith in others until shown otherwise.</li> <li>- Advocate for fair rewards for those who work more.</li> <li>- Believe in market-orientated institutions.</li> </ul>	<p><b>HIERARCHY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Views the world as controllable.</li> <li>- Nature is stable if not pushed beyond discoverable limits.</li> <li>- Human beings are malleable, flawed but recoverable through reliable institutions.</li> <li>- Equitable distribution based on rank, position, or need, determined by experienced authority.</li> </ul>
<p><b>FATALISM</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sees no logic or reason in the natural world.</li> <li>- Believes that man is unpredictable and inconsistent.</li> <li>- Lack of equity and constructive transformation.</li> <li>- Deficits in bonding with the natural world and fostering trust.</li> <li>- The process of learning is considered to be unattainable.</li> </ul>	<p><b>EQUALITY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Nature is interdependent and fragile.</li> <li>- People are caring.</li> <li>- Equality is the foundation of equality and leads to equality in results.</li> <li>- Equality and trust are related.</li> <li>- Institutions of unequal distribution are disregarded.</li> </ul>

### Towards a transdisciplinary approach

In order to address questions that must be investigated on multiple levels, from the microscopic to the macrosocial dynamics of the contemporary world, we need an approach that combines the science that studies the mechanisms of living systems, biology, with the sciences that deal with the ways in which human beings know and recognise living beings, both inside and outside themselves. How can biology, ecology, aesthetics and ethics be intertwined to explain the anthropological continuities, models or mechanisms of action that characterise what is considered alive? As Ingold (2013) argues, a biosocial approach does not imply reducing the social to the biological, or vice versa, but involves considering life as a unique process, in which living cells and human behaviour in groups show identical patterns, in constant correspondence with other human and non-human beings, sharing a common condition of becoming, which can be compared:

...to a hemp rope, twisted by multiple strands, in turn twisted by multiple fibres, each in turn twisted by its cellular and molecular constituents. In principle, it could be examined from near or far, microscopically or macroscopically. But at each level of resolution we find the same complexity, the same intertwining of threads,

the same metabolic exchange. Like rope, becoming is biological to the top and social to the bottom (p. 9).

Through the study of ethnographic cases, anthropology poses us questions first and foremost on an epistemological level. Can we find correspondences in the ways we know the world, both outside and inside ourselves, that lead us to think of a joint human endeavour? Although different scientific disciplines vary in terms of their objects, methods, purposes and the worldviews that drive them, together they can provide complementary visions. Rather than describing the relationship between, for example, anthropologists and biologists as a question of ontological differences, we can talk about different, but reciprocally enriching, epistemological perspectives.

For the Achuar, there is no term corresponding to what we mean by the word “nature” (Descola, 2005). Relations between humans and the world are not experienced in an oppositional way. Plants and animals differ from humans only in appearance, but they share the same soul, the same ethics. From the differences observed between our way of relating to nature and that of the Achuar, Descola hypothesised two initial different ontologies, understood as forms of identification and anchoring of subsequent cosmologies, and then described two further types.

The ontology specific to a culture can be deduced by observing the combination of interiority and physicality that guides the different processes of world-making. Naturalism emphasises the continuity between humans and nature in physicality, dissociating itself from it in interiority. Animism is characterised by an emphasis on the eco-anthropological continuum with physical discontinuity and continuity of interiority between humans and non-humans. Analogism highlights a discontinuity between humans and non-humans in terms of both interiority and physicality. Totemism is an ontology in which there is continuity of both physicality and interiority. A tension between matter and spirit seems to be present everywhere and resolved in different forms.

Ingold (2012) has argued for an inescapable bio-social continuity that characterises human beings, which, in his view, could be better understood if we were able to think in procedural terms, abandoning our cognitive predilection for substantial and prime essences. He outlines nature as a dynamic continuum of processes, movements and relationships. He proposes an epistemology based on the metaphor of interwoven lines, capable of better representing the dimensions of process, openness and the possibility of entering into relationships through intersecting nodes. All life can be seen as bundles of lines where, for example,

human lines interact with other human lines, rhododendrons' lines intermingle with those of other plants, and the lines of clouds and winds are in constant interplay. The interconnectedness of all things in such a “meshwork” is in stark contrast to the idea that is central to our philosophy of a substance, something more similar to a bubble, which refers to original and eternal essences, which, like individuals in the West, close in on themselves, feeling their own end within the confines of their own skin, an expression of a given DNA, making the central dimension of human experience, that of relationship, impervious to analysis (Ingold 2019; 2020).

In this respect, we must ensure that alternative knowledges – indigenous, artistic, experiential – are not dismissed but integrated as equally necessary for the planetary conversation. As bioethicist Professor Lolas-Stepke pointed out in his paper, when we try to assume multiple perspectives, we generally talk about multi- inter- or trans-disciplinarity, but it is possible to distinguish between these three modes. A team can be said to be multidisciplinary when some people have a common commitment. They try to solve a problem or set a problem from different perspectives, but each one maintains their own discourse, perspectives and contexts. When people agree on the content and meaning of terms, we can speak of interdisciplinarity, where, in addition to a common goal, the content and categories are also shared. Finally, the transdisciplinary perspective is when each one of the participants loses their “specialist chauvinism” and contributes to the development of the problem, participating in a process of agreeing on the terms with which the narrative is constructed and the context in which these different perspectives intersect or integrate. These are ways of structuring discourse, and different discourses need to be translated (*trans-lātus* = “carry across/over”, “take from one place to another”) from given fields or contexts to others. Issues of epistemic injustice may come into play here, since some discourses appear to be more valid than others in a hierarchically organised arena of knowledge. This conference can be seen a step towards a transdisciplinary approach able to look at a common problem by overcoming the cultural prejudices inherent within the disciplines themselves.

### **The contributions to this special section**

The contributions published in this special section discuss from different perspectives the question of the relationship between man, human beings and nature, and how this relationship is determined on the one hand and also determines on the other the very conception of human beings. In this respect,

various contributions from different disciplines have brought out both convergences and discontinuities.

Francesco Della Costa, a cultural anthropologist at the University of Milan Bicocca, presented a paper entitled “The planetary man: nature and visions in a post-Christian cosmology”. He examines the eco-anthropological perspective of Ernesto Balducci, Italian Catholic philosopher and activist, in his 1985 text *L'Uomo Planetario (The Planetary Man)*, as a proposal akin to those of Donna Haraway and the ontological approaches of Descola (2005) and Viveiros de Castro (1998). While the hierarchy of the Catholic Church has only recently begun to directly address ecological issues, some exponents of Christian thought, such as St Francis of Assisi, had long emphasised the centrality of the relationship between humans and non-humans. This relationship must be re-interpreted within a process of globalisation of the human species, whereby the planet is no longer conceived as a resource to be dominated and exploited for human needs but as a common home for humans and non-humans, to be preserved. The religious vision, or the sense of the sacred, which emerges when nature is *fascinans et tremendum*, is what can restore this planetary condition to us. The perception of the fragility of the world, akin to human fragility, should lead us to a creaturely commonality, to establish forms of cross-species solidarity with a view to survival.

In her paper “Natures, territories and the *Breath of Life*: The maintenance of *Jagiyi* or *Jafaikei* among the Murui people in the present, Colombian Amazon”, Judy Marcela Chaves-Agudelo, a postdoctoral researcher at the *Universidad Nacional de Colombia*, explores the Murui people’s philosophy of life, centred on *Jagiyi* or *Jafaikei* – the Breath of Life – as a form of contemporaneous native aesthetics. Through fieldwork, interviews with elders, and participation in rituals, she shows how this concept, rooted in the sacred Word and in practices such as the mabeadero and *maloka*, continues to guide everyday life and responses to social, political, and ecological upheavals. The analysis highlights four contemporary contexts in which the Breath of Life is maintained: the foundation of the Indigenous school *House of Knowledge*; the “cooling” of armed conflict; the re-creation of practices in contexts of displacement; and contributions to the Colombian Truth Commission. The article demonstrates how, by contextualising ancestral knowledge and practices, the Murui enact a living aesthetics that defends cultures, natures, and territories, while simultaneously offering a philosophy of resilience and coexistence.

Miria Gambardella, a Marie Skłodowska-Curie doctoral candidate in social and cultural anthropology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, presented a

paper entitled “Revolutionary grounds: political ontology of zapatista land relations”. She offers a reflection on nature as an analytical tool that highlights the strategic uses of ethnicity for the construction of political and economic alternatives through the Zapatista coffee trade. When linked to international activism, the coffee trade networks reveal themselves to be much more than simple monetary transactions. Ethics, nature and culture permeate every aspect of militant action. Through multi-sited research between Europe and Mexico and applying decolonial and post-development theories, Gambardella analyses how solidarity relationships are narrated and performed, investigating the strategies implemented by Zapatista coffee producers and European activists to build economic and epistemic alternatives by re-signifying their relationship with the land.

In her paper “Visions and ecologies: A comparative analysis on human-nature relationship”, Viviana Toro Matuk proposes a comparative reflection on the materials of the conference, adopting the lens of Cultural Theory. This theoretical framework, which identifies the four fundamental cultural configurations of individualism, hierarchy, egalitarianism, and fatalism, enables interpretation of the plurality of visions that emerge within the transdisciplinary dialogue. Her article seeks to highlight how each cosmology translates into specific representations of both nature and the human, and how, at the same time, possibilities of convergence and conflict between different perspectives may arise. Through the analysis of ethnographic cases and theoretical reflections, it becomes evident that cultural configurations shape not only models of human-environment relations but also disciplinary epistemological frameworks and research practices.

The article concludes by emphasising the need for a comparative approach capable of recognising the coexistence of heterogeneous visions and of constructing dynamic interpretative models, able to bring knowledges and practices into dialogue in order to grasp the multiple “natures” that define the relationship between humans and the non-human world.

What unites the contributions in this volume is the recognition that the relationship between humans and nature is not only descriptive but constitutive. How we envision nature shapes how we envision ourselves. The ecological vision advanced here is not a single doctrine but a plural, transdisciplinary conversation. To conclude, we return to the metaphor of the visionary. Just as the Fula visionary perceives dangers invisible to others, so too must we cultivate a collective ecological vision capable of discerning the traps laid by anthropocentrism, extractivism, and epistemic closure. To envision nature

otherwise is to envision humanity otherwise. It is to recognise our fragility not as a limitation but as the very ground for solidarity with all forms of life.

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