

Hans Fink:

CONCEPTIONS OF NATURE

Thank you for the invitation to come here today. As an old-fashioned academic who has rarely ventured beyond the limits of academia I am grateful for this chance to share some of my philosophical ideas in an open, multidisciplinary context focusing on visions for and practical steps towards a sustainable future not just in terms of survival but in terms of a richer, more truly human life for everyone. I am all for that.

This third session is called “Values, Mindsets and Beliefs” and we are meant to be discussing desirable changes in the way we think about ourselves and the world we live in. Such changes must involve changes in the way we express our thoughts in language; it is thus likely to involve changes in our use of concepts or even in the introduction of quite new conceptions.

Today I shall be talking about our use of the word or the concept NATURE which is in many ways a key concept in any general discussion of sustainability. What is human nature, and what is the place of humans in nature? We use this concept all the time without hesitation and without realizing that it is a highly complex concept which allows many conceptions of that which this label is applied to. My nature is my innermost being. How is this inner nature related to the outer nature where we may go for a walk? It is even a dangerous concept in that it allows us to slide unconsciously from one conception to another which is actually incompatible with the first. Robert Boyle warned against the concept in the 17th century and especially against the way in which we sometimes attribute all kinds of personal traits to nature talking about nature doing this or doing that, like doing nothing in vain, abhorring a vacuum, striking back or taking its revenge. In the 18th century David Hume reminded his readers that ‘nature’ is “a word than which none is more ambiguous and equivocal”. We should surely be cautious when we talk about nature, and perhaps even more so when we formulate our visions for our future.

I shall try to illustrate these ambiguities by discussing 6 rather different and partly incompatible conceptions of nature – both of human nature and of

nature in general – that are all relevant to our understanding of sustainability.

The first on my list is not the most common, but the one I shall eventually emphasize the importance of. This is a comprehensive and all-inclusive conception of nature. Everything, absolutely everything, has a nature and a place in nature on this conception. You cannot name anything without thereby regarding it as having a nature of its own and as member of all the species and genera that it is taken as belonging to. I have my nature, and I am exemplifying human nature and mammal nature and perhaps even rational nature. On a comprehensive conception this nature is all that is true about the item in question whether it is me, mankind or mammals or something else; and it is also all that can happen to that item and all that it can do to all other items. And nature in general, the nature that everything has a place in, simply is the way all natures fit together. Nature is “how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term” to use a phrase from the American philosopher Wilfrid Sellars. Nature is the all-encompassing totality, not regarded as mere sum or as a very, very long list of all the furniture of the universe, but seen as the dynamic interconnectedness from which items affords to be singled out by certain other items like ourselves. This is the only conception of nature that is truly holistic, and – I would add – truly consistent.

Though it is an ancient conception (versions of it can be found in Heraclitus, some stoics, Spinoza and probably in some forms of eastern thought as well) it is by no means the only or the dominant one in our modern, western culture. Mostly the word ‘nature’ is used in a contrasting rather than a comprehensive sense. The nature of something is seen as certain characteristics of that item rather than all its characteristics. For Aristotle and still today in many contexts the nature of something is what it is necessarily and in itself as opposed to what it may become through more or less accidental external intervention, where external intervention could be conscious human intervention or miraculous intervention. The nature of something is the way it normally, primarily or basically is and could develop due to its own inner forces. Human nature is our inborn abilities as opposed to their formation through nurture. Nature in general is seen as

certain parts of the whole rather than the whole itself and excluding the results of human or divine intervention. Nature can then be seen as those parts of the universe – or more often of the surface of the planet Earth – that are not subject to control and use by humans. Nature is thus understood in contrast to culture. This can, however, be seen either as an absolute or a merely relative contrast. A second conception of nature in general is thus the totality of all that is not and has in no way been subject to human interference. In that absolute sense there are few areas of the surface of the earth that has not been somehow influenced by human activities when we take our pollution of the atmosphere and the oceans into consideration.

A third, relative, conception relaxes the conditions for being nature by seeing it as opposed not to all results of cultural activities, but as opposed to that which is under more systematic control or under agricultural or technical utilization. Human nature then includes “natural” forms of nurture as opposed to artificial and repressing forms of upbringing, and nature in general is seen as the uncultivated wilderness with the animal and plant life that unfolds there relatively uninterrupted by humans though clearly somehow affected by them. This is nature as we see it on television in magnificent programs like BBC’s “Planet Earth”.

In a country like Denmark, however, there isn’t much nature in this sense left. For Danes the relevant relative contrast is between the rural and the urban, between outdoors and indoors. Nature is the scenery or landscape you see when driving through the countryside, or the forrests where you go for a walk, or the beaches where your summer cottage is, or the golf course where you improve your game. According to our best dictionary a prominent definition of nature among the many definitions there given, is: “The immediately visible part of the surface of the earth with its various elements (hills, valleys, lakes, rivers, etc.) and the world of plants and animals belonging to it, as it is seen lying under open skies and to some degree left to itself”. This is my fourth conception. It also involves the way in which certain products are standardly advertised as natural because somehow organic and environment friendly though obviously processed by humans in highly refined ways.

A completely different, fifth, contrasting conception of nature is that associated with the natural sciences. Here the mental, the conceptual, the ideal and the normative are regarded as being somehow outside nature, maybe even as merely illusory. Here human nature is our “biology”. This contrast is not limited to the surface of the earth and it cuts across the other contrasting conceptions mentioned so far. In terms of atoms, molecules and energy there is no relevant distinction between cultivated and uncultivated land, between tamed and wild animals, between city and country, or between organic and synthetic. To a large extent it is this conception of nature which has allowed the expansion of culture and civilization – the continuing colonization of larger and larger parts of nature as understood on the second, third and fourth conception. To a large extent it is this conception of nature that we shall nevertheless have to rely on for solutions to the environmental problems we have and that it has itself been greatly contributing to.

The sixth and final conception that I shall list here – others would be possible – is also a contrasting conception which regards nature as the earthly as opposed to the divine, the created world as opposed to the creator, the natural world as opposed to the supernatural world understood both as being above nature and being superlatively natural – even more primary and more basic than that which is otherwise taken to be primary and basic. This conception can be found in infinitely many varieties and has had enormous cultural impact. In many varieties it has regarded human beings as having a dual nature, body and soul, half animal and half angel, and it has been used both to legitimize and to delegitimize ruthless human exploitation of the created world. This contrast again is clearly different from and at least partly incompatible with the other contrasting conceptions.

The six conceptions are thus 1) nature as the whole, 2) nature as that which is completely unaffected by human, cultural and social interference, 3) nature as wilderness and the wild, 4) nature as the rural and green, 5) nature as the physical, and 6) nature as the earthly.

I believe that the shift in mindset needed is that we begin to orient ourselves more in accordance with the first and truly holistic conception,

and thus begin to understand all of human nature as fully integrated with the nature of everything else. We should as far as possible stop ourselves whenever we think of ourselves as somehow above, below or otherwise outside nature, and we should stop ourselves when we think of nature as less than the whole. Etymologically the word 'nature' is related to words for birth, being born and coming into being. A things nature is what it is from its birth or beginning, and nature in general is the world as it is originally or primary or basically, but I believe that it is crucial that we begin to understand or to remember that the world or the totality as it unfolds cannot be divided up in one part which is original and primary and another which is later and secondary; one part which is basic and another which is socially constructed or merely superstructural. In an unquestionably important sense the totality is what is original, primary and basic relative to any way of dividing it up.

If this is the deepest conception of nature, we should stop ourselves when we think that we are about to destroy nature or that it is up to us to save or care for nature. Nature is indestructible. Local developments may undermine themselves and thus be unsustainable, but nature is always sustainable. It is the unbreakable continuity reaching before the Big Bang and after the Great Crunch. We should be as precise and concrete as possible in our visions for the future and be talking about what exactly it is in nature that we are about to destroy, and what it is that it is up to us save and care for.

We should let the comprehensive conception of nature relativize all the contrastive. There is an issue of sustainability relating to each of the five other conceptions. It is crucial that we realize that we have the best of reasons to diminish the careless pollution of the atmosphere and the oceans, to leave substantial areas of the surface of the earth in a wild condition, to control the growth of our cities, to encourage a shift in the use of scientific knowledge, to develop new forms of science taking all of human nature into account, and to remind ourselves that we have not created the world, whether or not we believe that a deity has done so. We should exhibit cosmic modesty. We are neither lords nor stewards of nature. We are parts of the whole, and all we do always fit immediately into all else that happens. We shall keep trying as best we can to learn from our mistakes

and try to be decent and responsible persons, because we and everything else is going to live and die, exist and perish, both with the foreseen and the unforeseen consequences of all that we do as the parts of nature that we are.