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WHAT DOES RELIGION HAVE TO SAY ABOUT ECOLOGY?
A NEW APPRAISAL OF NATURALISM

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Abstract: Humans as created matter engage with the transcendental. The difference between matter and spirit has been categorised: (a.) material and earthly existence is deemed impure and temporary. (b.) The spiritual existence is deemed of higher ethical quality. What does religion as an activity focussing on the “higher” spiritual realm have to say about the “wordly” existence of created matter? Worldviews and a religious anthropology determine the outcome. Where human existence is viewed as something other than created matter, a different relationship exists between humans and nature as opposed to where human existence is viewed as being wholly part of created matter. This last stance is based on a “comprehensive anthropology”. Feuerbach referred to this as Naturalism. According to a naturalistic understanding, humankind is intrinsically part of nature. From nature comes all meaningful existence. This positive evaluation of nature provides direction for an ethical and responsible relationship between humankind and nature.

Key Words: Naturalism; anthropology; Feuerbach; ecology; ethics; anthropology; Spinoza; Deep Ecology

Introduction

In recent years the amount of academic consideration of the relationship between humans and nature from a religious perspective increased tremendously¹. In this regard compare the works by Paul Collins (1995), William A. Young (1997) and Dieter Gerten and Sigurd Bergmann (2012) and Whitney Bauman, Richard Bohannon and Kevin O'Brien (2011) for general approaches.

Just so the amount of academic reflections from different religions' perspectives on ecology increased. Roger S. Gottlieb's² monumental work attests to this. Also compare in this regard the unique perspectives from Buddhism³, Christianity⁴, Hinduism⁵ Islam⁶ and Judaism⁷. Even attempts were made to portray the indigenous traditions' view on ecology.⁸

The purpose of this article is to indicate how naturalism presents positive suggestions as to a responsible ecological engagement. The relationship between humans and nature has always been ambivalent. At times humans were considered to be fully part of created matter, completely part of nature. Almost a brother sun sister moon relationship, reflecting a harmonious co-existence. At times again the relationship was that of conqueror and conquered. Humans were considered to be superior and the ruler over nature. In such conditions nature was exploited and abused to the benefit of humans. Both of these positions were legitimized with religious and ideological convictions.

One of the main problems with environmental concerns is the way in which the relationship between humans and nature is conceived. A dualistic understanding of reality have as a first construct the physical world (i.e. empirical world as encountered through the senses) that stands over against the metaphysical world (i.e. the world of the spiritual, invisible and ideas). This construct must however be seen in combination with a second construct where the sacred⁹ (i.e. spiritual, holy, divine and transcendental) stands over and against the profane¹⁰ (i.e. which includes the earthly and all that is not holy). These two constructs in combination leads to an understanding that all that is metaphysical is sacred and superior and all that is physical is profane and inferior.

Currently we are living in a time where the relationship between human beings and nature is reconsidered. A concern with ecology, environmentalism creates an opportunity to re-evaluate the relationship between human beings and nature. The emergence of religious naturalism (compare Crosby) created the opportunity to reconfigure the relationship with nature. Religious naturalism is however a variation on early thoughts such as expressed by Parmenides, Spinoza and Feuerbach. Can this notion contribute to a new relationship and evaluation of nature? Is it possible

that religious naturalism, within a balanced appreciation, can bring about a more responsible attitude towards nature? The author thinks it can.

Humans and Nature:

The relationship between human beings and nature can be expressed as either being monistic or dualistic. Existence is viewed either as dualistic, propagating two separate modes of existence, or as monistic, accepting one mode of existence. Humans are either viewed as being completely part of nature, one in essence, or humans are set up separate from nature, being of a different essence:

- humans and nature are of one substance (monistic)
- humans and nature are of separate substance (dualistic)

These two positions gave rise to several variations over centuries. A brief overview of the development of these models will guide us in our understanding.

Monism and Dualism

The Greek philosopher, Parmenides (first half of the fifth century BCE) presented a monistic understanding of nature by propagating a 'unity of existence' between human beings and nature. The teachings of Parmenides is found in a single document written by him; a poem called 'On Nature', of which only 160 lines remain intact. For Parmenides all existence originates from the same matter. He considers the multitude of things to be encountered through human senses to be an illusion¹¹. The only true being is 'The One' which is infinite and indivisible. This 'One' is not God. Parmenides thinks of it as material and extended. It cannot be divided since it is everywhere¹². All matter is one, eternal and timeless. Human existence is intrinsically part of nature as humans and nature share the same essence. This position is later on in history taken up again by Naturalists such as Spinoza, Feuerbach and Religious Naturalists.

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)¹³, philosopher with a Jewish background, summarizes his view on reality with the statement *Deus sive natura*, by which he makes known his belief that God and nature are two exchangeable synonyms. Reality consists of one substance: 'In nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute'¹⁴. With this idea Spinoza connects with Parmenides' original monism. One substance cannot cause or produce another substance. All substance alludes to one origin¹⁵. 'One cannot be conceived to be distinguished from another, that is there cannot be many, but only one'¹⁶. Everything that exists is grounded in the same substance, which Spinoza refers to as God or nature (*Deus sive natura*).

For Spinoza there is no differentiation between created and un-created matter. All matter is created out of itself and is not dependent on any other matter for existence¹⁷. Substance is the origin of itself. Only if something is considered the creation of itself is it considered as substance¹⁸. If something is dependent on something else outside of itself for existence, it no longer can be considered substance.

In line with ancient philosophy Spinoza considers nature to be the base of the universe. Nature originated from itself. The characteristic of being divine is assigned to nature as something outside of nature¹⁹. Plato already in *Timaeus* identified God and nature as being one. The universe and the divine is considered to be of one substance, one living being. God is for Spinoza not a person and not a living being. At most God is nature, and nature is the eternal substance that created itself²⁰. Human beings are part of the things considered to be one with nature.

Spinoza's position was for long labelled as pantheistic. Pleger²¹ however indicates that this is misleading, as pantheism traditionally is understood to reflect a polytheistic position, where Spinoza's notion was that of monotheism, if it is at all possible to talk of theism in Spinoza's thoughts. Spinoza does not reflect a theism as for him God is not a person²². Pantheism describes the idea that God and the world are not two separate entities and that everything in the world is part of God²³. This is the opposite than the idea that creation is something apart, outside of God. For Spinoza matter is not things, but they are aspects of the divine Being (God/Nature)²⁴. Substance cannot be produced by anything else, it is produced by itself, emphasising the unity of all things.

There is however a diversity within this unity. God/nature, every substance, consists of many attributes²⁵. By attribute Spinoza refers to that which is perceived to constitute the essence of a substance. Attributes can never be substances but remain merely characteristics of a substance. Every existing thing is perceived of as a part of one infinite substance. Humans, animals, plants, all existing elements are then merely attributes of the one unifying substance, namely God/Nature. This reflects an extreme monism.

Plato, who had the biggest respect for Parmenides and apparently agreed with him, later in his dialogical treatise, *Parmenides*, criticized and opposed monism. Plato pointed out that although Parmenides maintains the unity of existence, he however ends up with a dualism, namely the idea of unity and the idea of existence²⁶. For Plato there can be many ideas, where for Parmenides, there can only be One²⁷.

In his treatise entitled *Timaeus*, Plato sets out a description of creation. God created everything, calling into order all that exists. Intelligence was put in the soul and the soul placed in the human body²⁸. The soul was created first and only then the body. God made the world as a

whole, as a living organism possessing a soul and intelligence. The Creator god made humans, animals and gods.

Humans are in nature, created matter. But humans are of dual nature: part matter and part spirit, thus indicating a connection to a spiritual dimension. Humans are not only matter, but spirit as well. Plato pointed to this dual human existence, the body is matter and belongs to this earth, but the soul is spirit and belongs to a different dimension²⁹. Socrates explored this idea further and suggested (compare in *Phaedo*) that the body is of lesser value. The soul is of superior value and worth engaging with³⁰. This anti-material position created an aversion for anything encountered through the senses. All material matter is there only to sustain the human body. There is no intrinsic value in matter. This eventually led to a utilitarian outlook on nature.

Simultaneously nature as matter was regarded as of lesser value and therefore nature was spared the abuse and exploitation we only encounter later during the Enlightenment period with the objectification of nature as matter of value.

Since Plato, monism fell in disrepute and was replaced by a tendency to place unity and plurality together; proclaiming unity in spite of diversity. Many possibilities arose as to how to identify the place of humans within created matter; to find the place of the part in relationship with the whole. Socrates in his treatise *Protagoras*, described two possibilities: (i) explaining the part to the whole as a clump of gold stands in relationship with the larger clump of gold or (ii) parts of the face in relationship to the whole of the face. The first example represents a monism where a homogenate unity is portrayed, in a similar way as Parmenides envisaged reality. The second example is a model expounded on by the emperor-philosopher, Marcus Aurelius³¹.

According to Marcus Aurelius each individual can be distinguished from another, although all are organically part of nature, indicating the world as a living being. Marcus Aurelius' position on existence seems to be consisting of two opposing concepts: on the one hand he portrays existence as ordered and carefully arranged where human beings are part of this arrangement. On the other hand reality seems to be a haphazard mixtures of elements (atoms) of which human beings are by change also part off³². For Marcus Aurelius reality is either governed (i) by way of the notions of the relationships between the parts, implying causality or (ii) by a gracious (divine) provider or (iii) by chaotic powers, implying impromptu interactions of the elements. For Marcus Aurelius the first and second possibilities are combined in a way that the causal interactions are determined by divine interference³³.

Marcus Aurelius combines the monistic and dualistic views of nature by indicating humans are of the same substance as nature causing an organic interaction between humans and nature. This interaction is however influenced by a divine power, thus reflecting a Platonic idea

already set out by Plato in *Timaeus*. Fate is therefore determined by God. Humans are part of nature but are not without free will, delivered to the course of nature. Marcus Aurelius sets out a monistic understanding, but allows humans to have some freedom and independence. His understanding of the relationship between human beings and nature illustrates the complexity of the problem.

A similar position on a monistic evaluation of nature is presented by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872).³⁴

Naturalism as a philosophical school of thought arising during the 19th century is currently experiencing some attention. The origin of naturalism sprouts from a reaction to the philosophy of Hegel (1770-1831) and other Idealists who maintained a dualistic understanding of reality. Hegelian thought in crude description holds that over against the empirical world the real world of ideas exists. This understanding has its roots in Plato's dualistic understanding of reality. Instead of a dualism, Ludwig Feuerbach and other naturalists hold the monistic idea that there is only one reality, namely that of nature. Nature is an all-embracing reality from where all existence (supernatural and natural), ideas and reality come from. The result is that there is no room for the transcendental, metaphysics or ethics. This line of thought eventually led to atheism. To hold that the only reality is nature leads to the understanding of the existence of an empirical reality which can be defined as materialism. This line of thought was expounded on by Karl Marx (1818-1883), another contemporary of Feuerbach.

The naturalist, Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), subscribing to Naturalism reached the conclusion of monism. This world is the only world there is and all life has its origin and end in it. There is no other world (real or supernatural) than this reality.

The moment one understands one's own status as that of detached from nature, one takes on the primary role of the conqueror of the world and of nature. This detachment from nature is due to modernity and rationalisation. Rationalisation as result of the Enlightenment made humans the acting subject in the world. Humans are set apart from nature; humans become the subject over against all others that are considered the objects, subjected to human thought. Rationality elevates humans to a superior being. All other objects are at the disposal of humans. This leads to utilitarianism. Humans act with the expectation to maximise his pleasure and minimise discomfort. Even in deliberation on nature, humans consider 'what is in it for me.'

The problem then lies in the understanding that earth is portrayed as equal to profane and physical (empirical) and lesser than spiritual and sacred. Sacred and metaphysical is equated. This philosophical construct stuck in Western thought still determines in the minds of many the question whether preserving earth really matters that much? The 'higher'

faculties of human existence, namely the spiritual, make a connection with the 'true' essence of existence, namely the sacred realm.

This is however not the only way the relationship between physical and metaphysical is portrayed. The notion of assigning nature with some divine or spiritual character is followed by Feuerbach. This concept is today revived in what is currently called 'deep ecology'.³⁵ See the article by George Sessions (1987) for a thorough overview of the origin of the 'Deep Ecology' movement. Also see later on in this article an explanation of the revival of Religious Naturalism.

'Deep ecology' refers to current efforts to emphasise and sensitise communities to the need the environment is in. The concept is related to Naturalism in the sense that it re-evaluates the status of nature by either indicating the autonomous value of nature or emphasising nature's belonging to God³⁶. It is in fact an umbrella term for many philosophies grounded in different religions and emphasising the intrinsic value of nature, acknowledging that all things in nature are equal and all living things share ontologically the same essence, acknowledging the sacred character of nature and propagating a humility towards nature³⁷. These principles to a large degree correspond to the principles as set forth by Naturalism.

Feuerbach on Nature

Feuerbach's understanding of religion needs to be read against the backdrop of his time. Feuerbach lived in a Europe affected by rationalisation and modernisation brought about by the Enlightenment. Feuerbach had it especially against the Idealism of his time. According to Feuerbach Idealism, of which Christianity was the biggest exponent, attempted to separate humans from nature³⁸ and thereby alienating humans from his true nature, that of being one with nature. This unity with nature is not to be seen as a mystical union where humans are spiritually taken up in nature but rather in a holistic sense referring to the nature of humans as created matter just like nature.

Concept of religion

Feuerbach tries to identify the original elements of religion³⁹. In doing so he states that religion is based on the basic human feeling of dependence⁴⁰. The very nature of religion indicates this feeling of dependence: religion is a characteristic of a being realising its own inabilities, limitations and flaws, especially the realisation of being mortal⁴¹. The reality of death is for Feuerbach the biggest human limitation. The tomb becomes the birthplace of the gods according to Feuerbach. The thought of death drives man to reach out to the only known immortal being, namely gods. Without death, no religion would exist.

The feeling of dependence stands in opposition to egoism which according to Feuerbach can also become the base and source for religion⁴². In egoism the “I” stands above that which is acknowledged as being of divine character. Egoism causes humans to feel important and as something meaningful. Dependence makes one realise “I” am the lesser before one more powerful. True dependence is fear, especially the fear of death⁴³. The outer power which “I” fear and feel dependent of, fills me with psychic power which is nothing but egoistic motives and concerns without which there can be no power in me and no ability to feel dependent. The will to act, to feel, to speak is an urge placed inside of me by an outside power of which “I” feel dependent to enable me to act, feel and speak. To feel dependent of another being is in fact according to Feuerbach only the dependence on my own being, my own ideals, wishes and concerns. That outer power of which “I” feel dependent is then nothing else than an elongation of my own inner self. This will be more explained later on.

For Feuerbach⁴⁴ the first and oldest religion was nature religion⁴⁵. The original gods of ancient cultures were before they became spiritual or political/war gods, spirits of nature⁴⁶. Nature is among the primal cultures (living close to nature) not a symbol of a hidden god, but nature itself becomes the object of veneration⁴⁷.

Feuerbach separates religion into two categories: religion of theism and religion of nature. Theism causes the separation between humans and nature, because theism creates the impression of the existence of another being existing besides humans and nature⁴⁸. Theism wants to separate humans and nature and isolate humans as if human beings are above and against nature as an all important, proud being⁴⁹. Original religion did not have this malevolent intention. Religion originally was an expression of humans in union and togetherness with nature and the world. It seems as if Feuerbach sees gods as the enemy of religion. Religion wants to maintain the close relationship between humans and nature. The gods, as if being jealous of this relationship, intervene and separate humans from nature.

Original nature religion gave expression to the union between humans and nature⁵⁰. Humans and nature are equals⁵¹. This is the original human state of being. If the feeling of dependence is the base and origin of religion, human dependence should be directed at nature⁵². Nature provides humans with that which humans need. Feuerbach sees this not only in a physical sense as if nature provides food and drink, but also inner energy, spiritual guidance and cognitive clarity⁵³. Humans can survive and flourish within nature. In this sense as long as humans are dependent on nature, humans will have all that is necessary for existence. The first human beings apparently had a feeling of dependence on nature⁵⁴. This will either be confirmed or denied by anthropologists and ethnologists. Original human existence as nomadic hunter gatherers and later on as

static agrarian communities made humans fully dependent on the provision by nature.

Feuerbach elucidates his understanding of the concept of nature by indicating that for him nature is all that humans are not⁵⁵. Nature is not god to Feuerbach as he understands Spinoza⁵⁶ to imply⁵⁷.

The raging debate on Spinoza in Feuerbach's time was concerned about Spinoza's theory that God and nature, spirit and matter was equal⁵⁸. Spinoza's theory (*Deus sive natura* - God or nature) implies that God and nature are exchangeable entities. For Feuerbach there is a difference between the two: either God or nature. For Feuerbach God comes from nature and not the other way around⁵⁹.

Nature is everything humans can encounter through the senses. Nature is not mystic⁶⁰. Nature is challenging the senses. Nature is everything humans can see and know and realise that no human hand has created it. Nature is the first cause, having as result plants, animals, water, sun, moon from which humans benefit⁶¹. Nature has no beginning and no end⁶². Everything in nature stands in relationship to one another. Everything is relative compared to the other. Everything is simultaneously cause and result. Nature does not have a hierarchical structure⁶³.

The essence of being human is determined by the existence of humans on planet earth⁶⁴. Because earth exists, humans exist. The same power that brought planet earth into being, brought humans into being. The cause of earth, is also the cause of being human. The original cause gave rise to humans. The original cause is however not a physical entity, merely a concept, a being existing in our thoughts⁶⁵.

Even death, the most dreadful of evils that can threaten human existence, is considered by Feuerbach as natural⁶⁶. The moment humans realise and accept the union with nature, death is nothing to fear. Death is the return to nature⁶⁷.

The animals are also part of nature. Humans are also dependent on animals. It might even happen that animals, that which humans are dependent on, become venerated and worshipped as gods⁶⁸. The festivals celebrated in early nature religions commemorating the different seasons were expressions of the influence nature had on human existence⁶⁹. The awareness of the cycles in nature: light and darkness, heat and cold, life and death are all part of the content of nature/primordial religions.

Religion was part of everyday existence for humans. There was no separation between the sacred and the profane (compare Durkheim's division⁷⁰). Everything in life had to do with religion⁷¹.

Concept of Theism

Reflecting on divine existence is for Feuerbach anthropology as well as physiology⁷². When reflecting on theism, Feuerbach suggests that two aspects are at play: human nature as well as physical nature. On the one

side Feuerbach maintains that gods are the expressions of the particular human understanding of the self in a particular context. That which is known as 'God' is in fact the divination of human nature⁷³. On the other side Feuerbach states that God, the cause of all physical things (including humans) is nothing else than the expression of the divination and personification of the essence of nature⁷⁴. God is nature. The God filled with human qualities, a conscience and will of its own is nothing more than a portrayal of human self. God is the construct of the human mind. Human beings⁷⁵ project the qualities and functions they themselves lack. This projection is held to be reality. This reality is then worshipped as being God. What humans are not, but wishes to be, that becomes god or is god⁷⁶.

The essence of religion for Feuerbach is that nature is the original, first and last being⁷⁷. Nature is an objective authority outside of humans⁷⁸. To make more of nature than merely this is speculation. Nature is not spirit, a thinking being. Nature is not derived from a spiritual or supernatural or unnatural being. Nature is divine being⁷⁹. Humans venerate nature not only as something on which humans are dependent, but also as the being through which humans came into being and the place where humans return to after death. Therefore Feuerbach suggests nature be called what it is, namely our mother⁸⁰.

Feuerbach indicates how the ancient religion of the Germanic nations, a religion he believes to be the last of the true nature/primal religions, believed that not only humans but also all gods come from nature⁸¹. Feuerbach sees this common source of origin as proof that humans and gods are the same. If gods have nature as source of origin, and humans have nature as source of origin, then humans and gods share the same origin. This syllogism is however based on false premises. For some this might be the only perspective to be true, but since it is speculative, it is not necessarily the only perspective.

How we should understand this divinity of nature is not clear. Feuerbach denies that he implies pantheism, as Spinoza might have⁸². This can however be contested. For Feuerbach the belief in the divine character of nature is an understanding of the unity between the abstract and the empirical. For Feuerbach humans can only believe in the existence of that which intervenes in human existence through acts and signs that can be experienced through the senses⁸³. It is in the nature of religion to be experienced through the senses. Truth lies in the sensory⁸⁴. The implication is that human senses are divine since if the gods are sensory beings, human senses are divine⁸⁵. Humans encounter the gods through the senses. The divine character lies in the senses and not in the gods. The truth in the nature/primal religions is based on the fact that nature can be experienced through the senses.

During his own lifetime Feuerbach was criticised for the emphasis he put on the union between humans and nature, and by implication with the gods. He denies the accusation of making nature a deity in terms of pantheism⁸⁶. Pantheism makes too much of nature according to Feuerbach, just as Idealism, Theism and Christianity makes not enough of nature⁸⁷. It should be prevented that the religious effects of nature is over emphasised. Nature should be seen for what it is, namely our Mother.⁸⁸ When nature is perceived as our mother, we should treat her parallel as how we treat earthly mothers: not through the eyes of 'religious children', but through the 'eyes of adults, self-aware human beings'⁸⁹. The moment one worships something as an object outside of oneself, one adds to the object of veneration and no longer sees it for what it truly is.

The idea God originates in the human mind⁹⁰. God as the original cause, the cause of the cause, is merely an idea, a concept of the mind without real existence⁹¹. For Feuerbach God is not the cause of human existence. There are several causes of human existence: lungs cause us to breath and maintain life, blood causes the body to function and maintains life. There are many things causing human existence. Nature is the last resort of our existence⁹². God does not reveal himself in nature. The opposite is rather true: nature reveals itself in God. God is the abstraction of nature. Nature is concrete, true being. God as abstract cannot be known through the senses⁹³.

Humans did not create themselves. The essence of human existence does not derive from God, but is to be found in nature⁹⁴. For Feuerbach the word God is too mysterious, too vague and too laden with meaning. He prefers the word 'nature' as it is a clear, meaningful, unequivocal word. Nature existed before all other living beings, therefore nature has supremacy, not in a chronological or ethical way, but merely as the first to exist. Being human is the embodiment of nature. The being in which nature becomes a personal, conscious and thinking being is humankind⁹⁵.

In religion humans set themselves before a higher being. The true higher being is in fact nature⁹⁶. The God portrayed in religion is considered the cause of nature. All religions have different gods as religions have different people belonging to the religions, people whose divine character is worshipped in religion. So religion is nothing else than the history of mankind.

God as the expression of the essence of nature is the originator of all living things. According to God's physicality he is originator of all physical beings, including nature⁹⁷. According to his ethical character he is the originator of all moral beings, namely humans. The original God is a being having its origin in nature⁹⁸.

Science and nature

Feuerbach sees nature not as the textbook from where humans ought to derive scientific knowledge from⁹⁹. Ancient (nature/primal) religions have not only utilised nature in order to gain knowledge of astronomy and physics as some philosophers according to Feuerbach, claim¹⁰⁰. Ancient religions saw nature for the easthetic value it holds. Science in this sense becomes the enemy again attempting to separate humans from nature. Indeed this is what science through rationalisation has achieved.

Max Weber, one of Feuerbach's contemporaries, indicated the effect of science on the understanding of religion. Although Weber and Feuerbach had different understandings as to the nature of religion, the effect of science on religion described by Weber, is indeed relevant to Feuerbach's understanding.

One of the enemies of religion is the human tendency to rationalise. Rationalisation as result of the Enlightenment encourages humans to seek through rational ways meaning in reality¹⁰¹. This exercise in rationalism suppresses the belief in magic and causes that the world becomes disenchanted. Through the process of rationalization the world is demystified. The mysterious in the world is explained through rational explanations leaving the world devoid of mystery and secrets. Weber called this the 'world-fleeing intellectualist religion'¹⁰². Through rationalism there is no more room left for the transcendental to operate in the empirical world. Every mysterious event now has a logical, rational explanation. All empirical phenomena have a clearly defined meaning.

Science as introduced through the Enlightenment has set humans up and over against nature, dividing humans and nature as the subject and object, and thereby making nature the object to be dissected, discovered, analysed and understood. The trascendental was explained away, as Weber indicates. Nature was no longer appreciated for its easthetic value, but for its utility value. Nature was also by science made devoid of its mysterious character Feuerbach believed nature possessed. One of the consequences of the Enlightenment (modernisation and rationalisation) was the introduction of utilitarianism.

Feuerbach's understanding of naturalistic anthropology contributes to the understanding of the worldview as well as giving direction in where to place humans in regard to nature¹⁰³. Hegel maintained the theory on creation to see nature as an idea within human existence. Hegel's theory was that nature was derived from the idea and was therefore dependent on the idea for existence. Feuerbach managed through his work to restore nature in its rightful place as an original absolute¹⁰⁴. Feuerbach maintained that nature was indeed the autonomous original and not a derivative, a second-hand reality so to speak. Nature brings forth the idea

and human spirit. Human spirit is made absolute in religion and is wrongly interpreted by humans as to be God¹⁰⁵.

Naturalism is the understanding that the world is a whole comprising of natural combinations and everything happens by way of natural causes. Nature is the embracing whole, also including the spiritual (non-empirical). Due to this all-embracing one entity, namely nature, there is no possibility of a dualistic worldview in terms of a separation between spirit and matter, nor idea and reality. The result is that naturalism introduces monism where everything belongs to nature, falling back on the monism as presented by Parmenides¹⁰⁶.

Science still has a place and function according to Feuerbach. Feuerbach maintains that natural science is a separate field outside of the order of nature as it results from human endeavour. Human nature is different to nature and therefore able to produce natural science¹⁰⁷. Humans have a different position as to animals. In naturalism this special status of humans among all living things is not based on religious or idealistic theories¹⁰⁸. Humans are aware of their own existence. Humans can still be subject in the world but not at the cost of the world.

The dual worldview rationalism helped to create contributed to the degradation and exploitation of nature which over time brought about the terrible condition nature is in today. Feuerbach's theory of Naturalism did not cause much concern for nature during his own time. Religions can contribute to the reversal of the fortune of nature. In this regard Feuerbach's theory of Naturalism might be of assistance.

'Deep Ecology' and Naturalism

Roger S. Gottlieb defines the concept of 'deep ecology' as 'a sense of reverence and sacredness, insight and inspiration, that is to be found in the "more than human" world'¹⁰⁹. With this he indicates that deep ecology is not a new religion, but it rather is related to all world religions as it shares in the discursive, emotive and cognitive space of all religions¹¹⁰. Deep ecology matches up to world religions as it shares in the 'celebration and awe' associated with all religions. Deep ecology has this 'celebration and awe' for the natural world¹¹¹. Deep ecology focusses on the value of nature but also on what humans are, namely natural beings just like so many other natural beings that are sacred¹¹².

Gal Kober¹¹³ defines Deep Ecology as a set of views that postulates a moral obligation of humans towards nature. This is based on the understanding that humans are intrinsically part of nature; an ecocentric understanding. Deep Ecology therefore stands directly opposed to what Kober describes as 'Shallow Ecology'¹¹⁴: an anthropocentric understanding. This is more concerned with the survival of human existence and therefore calls for concern and preservation of nature. Deep Ecology does not depart

as Shallow Ecology from a utilitarian view of nature. Deep Ecology calls for a protection of nature based on the intrinsic value of nature.

Deep Ecology identifies as the one main denominator all religions have in common, the human connectedness to nature which should be respected and treated with love and awe. Gottlieb indicates that the foundation of the human connectedness to nature is the human dependence on nature¹¹⁵. Without realising it, Gottlieb is echoing what Feuerbach saw as the basic element in Naturalism: the feeling of dependence on nature. Kober¹¹⁶ prefers to talk about an “inter-dependence” between all creatures in nature. Humans can learn much from nature. Deep Ecology also assigns a sacred teaching function to nature. Nature becomes the source, the text, the ‘holy book’ which teaches humanity the sacred truths¹¹⁷. One of the biggest truths proclaimed by nature is the social responsibility humans have. Also the idea of dying and becoming one with nature makes the idea of death less daunting¹¹⁸. Also this concept echoes Feuerbach’s thoughts on death.

Religious Naturalism

The monistic understanding of the relationship between human beings and nature is currently continued in Religious Naturalism. Humans consist of matter and are completely equal to and part of nature. The human ability to question and investigate the surroundings set humans apart from nature¹¹⁹.

Religious naturalists acquire religious meaning from nature¹²⁰. Religious attention can however be directed at a different position. The opposite of religious naturalism would be super-naturalism where religious meaning is derived from super-natural beings or powers residing in a super-natural realm¹²¹. Religious naturalism acknowledges nature as source and location of transcendence.

Where transcendence is perceived to be located in a different sphere, super-naturalists direct their religious attention to a sphere above and beyond nature¹²². The origin and future of nature is then bound to this super-natural source of transcendence. The super-naturalist position leads to the belief in the existence of God, perhaps the creator and sustainer of nature. The existence of nature is dependent on something or someone greater than itself. This super-natural being is what Thomas Aquinas refers to as God (*Summa Theologica* Q2 Art. 3)¹²³. Human existence within nature is bound to the acts of the theistic super-natural power known as God. Donald Crosby¹²⁴ argues that Muslim as well as Jewish scholars reason in similar fashion. The whole of the universe is dependent and directed towards God. This describes the super-naturalist position on human and nature relations.

Religious naturalism on the other hand makes no reference to any divine being existing in a separate domain. The universe exists by its own powers and principles. Nature independently provides and sustains itself; existing autonomously. All living beings derive their origin from nature, human beings included. Nature and not devotion to a super-natural being, provides meaning to life.

Humans react to nature and find meaning in the harmonious existence in nature. Humans are considered to be indivisible part of nature, reflecting the notion of monism found with Parmenides. No divine revelation from a super-natural realm is required. Nature provides sustenance, spiritually and physically. No divine action of salvation or forgiveness is necessary. No continuous human existence after death, either in hell or heaven or reincarnation, is considered. Human existence is focussed on contributing to life here and now¹²⁵. This reflects the naturalist position of human and nature relations.

The super-naturalist position reflects a dualistic understanding of human's relationship to nature, whereas the naturalist position reflects a monistic approach.

Third way: (Monism, Dualism, unity in diversity)

So far it is an explanation of the monistic and dualistic understanding of the relationship between humans and nature. There however is a third possibility of understanding the relationship, namely the differentiation of the unity. The unity is grounded in a plurality. Nature is portrayed as a process of self-functioning, living systems, which over time dissipate. In this way monism is combined with the evolution theory¹²⁶.

The third possible explanation is when every part associates in the unity of existence with the whole. This is referred to by Pleger¹²⁷ as the relationship of a micro-cosmos to a macro-cosmos. Each individual part is seen as a replica of the whole. This is the model chosen by Plato in his later-philosophical explanation of the cosmos. It also corresponds to the view of Marcus Aurelius.

Here the example of Marcus Aurelius referred to earlier can be applied. The human face consists of many different elements: a nose, eyes, ears, lips, underlying muscle, tissue and even the hidden nerve endings etc. All these components together form one organic construct, namely the face. The face needs all the individual components to function optimally. Although the face is one organic whole, it can be broken down in separate entities which all work together to the functioning of one entity. In this way humans can be perceived as being part of the larger whole of nature, being an individual component but also being intrinsically part of the functioning of the whole.

Conclusion

We have followed two lines of understanding the relationship between humans and nature: a monistic line (presented by Parmenides, Spinoza, Feuerbach, Naturalists and Religious Naturalism) and a dualistic line (presented by Plato). A third possible line is immanent according to the understanding of Marcus Aurelius combining the two lines of monism and dualism. This third way can be identified as 'unity in diversity'. Humans are part of nature, but humans can be differentiated from other beings and even from different individuals.

The question of the nature of things is also illustrated by the topic of Religion and Ecology. These two are indeed two concepts which at first sight do not seem to have anything in common. Both concepts seem to have two opposing places of origin: religion is concerned with the divine, the invisible, the transcendental, metaphysical, that which is encountered through the soul and considered to be eternal and of higher value. Ecology on the other hand is concerned with nature, the physical earth; all that is empirical, traditionally deemed profane and temporary. By bringing these two worlds into conversation a solution might be immanent.

Naturalism may show the way forward. Naturalism as professed by Feuerbach maintains a unified understanding of reality, making no distinction between physical and metaphysical. Only one reality exists, namely that of the physical. Everything considered to be of metaphysical nature derive from the physical world known as nature.

No divination of nature

Feuerbach does not follow the same pantheistic line of argument that was followed by Spinoza. Spinoza assigns divine character to nature. Nature becomes the focus of religious attention, implying the worship of nature for the sacred value it inherently possesses. Feuerbach denounces pantheism but instead suggests that the divine (just as humans) originates from nature. This monistic understanding is a clear indication of the unity Feuerbach professes between humans, nature and the transcendental. Neither humans nor nature then become the location of the divine. The sacred remains autonomous and objective in terms of humans and nature. This holistic approach to understanding the relationship of humans, nature and the transcendental is the focus point of this argument.

As to Feuerbach's positivism and understanding how God is the projection of human's fulfilment of dreams and ideals, this article does not want to argue against or for such statement. It is however evident that the platform Feuerbach uses to build his understanding of the divine is not the only platform.

The advantage of stating the unity between humans, nature and the transcendental is that such an understanding breaks with the traditional thinking that the higher register of human existence is the spiritual and intellectual. Humans are now seen as not only operating in a spiritual,

intellectual capacity, but as an empirical, concrete being part of nature. In this way humans have rediscovered their feet as well as their head. Humans are part of nature, part of this reality, part of this planet, standing in nature. Simultaneously humans can, firmly grounded in reality, still engage with ideas of the transcendental. By establishing Naturalism (or even referred to as materialism¹²⁸ by some) Kahl emphasises the importance of our concern with the material world we live in.

With Feuerbach's emphasis on nature it would be reductionist to think he merely refers to the natural order of the world as we encounter it in nature (now meaning our surroundings filled with trees, rivers and animals). For Feuerbach nature refers to a whole of existence, including culture, civilization, society, science and institutions¹²⁹. The value would then be to see our concern with nature as a holistic understanding of concern for all existence (spiritual and material). Our concern can not only be reduced to our concern for trees, water and animals. Ecology in this light refers to complete human existence and all relationships humans encounter. True Naturalism urges us to have all of this in our scope when concerned with ecology. Our *habitus* is not only material, but also spiritual. It includes our religious and cultural heritage that is in need of conservation. The unity between humans, nature and the transcendental emphasises this holistic concern.

Conservation as cheap morality

To grasp the unity of humans, nature and the transcendental is to understand the inter-dependency of humans, nature and the transcendental. Taking care of the environment is not to the advantage of only one party. All will benefit. Conservation can therefore not be a pious act by humans stemming from a deep concern of moral behaviour to be rewarded with salvation or redemption of some sort. Environmental concern is again not the means to a higher goal.

Ecological concern is not cheap morality. True concern for nature is born from the realisation of the own identity. Ecological concern is not focussed on humans. Otherwise it would again be an egoistic justification of human existence in the world. Jürgen Moltmann¹³⁰ pleads an end to this anthropocentrism. Naturalism points away from humans and makes one aware of the inter-dependency between humans, nature and the transcendental. There is no place for utilitarian concern or humanistic considerations or pious acts. Nature is no longer an object outside of humans to be seen as the "bread-basket" from which humans can endlessly take. Human actions in nature are no longer the maximizing of human pleasures and minimizing human discomfort. There is no place for utilitarianism in Naturalism. Human action in nature can also no longer be an expression of human moral or pious position. The unity of humans, nature and the transcendental should be seen in the construct of mutual

responsibility. When not taking the partner's concern into consideration, shame comes over one for not performing your duties.

To act to the benefit of nature is an expression of existential understanding. It no longer is a moral or pious act, but an understanding of the unity between humans, nature and the transcendental. This unity is not ontological as if humans, nature and the transcendental share in the same substance. This unity must be understood in terms of inter-dependency.

Seeing the unity between humans and nature, both as created reality

Nature is not a non-human world (compare Gottlieb¹³¹). Nature is a place accommodating humans. Nature is not alien to humans and humans to nature. Nature is part of created matter, just like humans. Nature is the reality humans live in. Neither human nor nature is the creator. In that sense the triologue is between humans, nature and the transcendental which is responsible for the origin and maintenance of reality.

The world has not been created for us. Nature brought forth humans¹³². We live in this world, but we are not from this world. Humans are children of nature, not the owner, nor master of nature¹³³. The idealism of an undying, immortal spirit is denied in Naturalism. Humans exist and then die. Humans are not the conquerors of nature, but should be humbly part of nature¹³⁴, as humans after death return to nature¹³⁵.

Deep ecology echoes much of Feuerbach's theory of Naturalism. A cry goes out to the world to realise its connectedness to nature. This unity of a "democratic integration of the human race into the life of the earth system" is emphasised by Moltmann¹³⁶. Nature is not the inferior reality it was for long believed to be. Nature has some sacred value. Nature is like humans, created reality. This is the reality humans live in. This is the reality known to humans through the senses. Humans did not create nature. Nature has been around longer than humans have. What Feuerbach and Gottlieb states as humans' feeling of dependence on nature, should perhaps be viewed in a reciprocal manner: nature is also dependent on humans. If humans and nature are to continue to exist, an inter-dependency is necessary. Through taking care of one another, in unity, humans and nature might survive as both are dependent on the transcendental.

Lessons from Naturalism

The intention of this article is not to portray Naturalism as the solution to the environmental crisis. The revival and adherence to the principles of Naturalism will not save nature. In this debate on Religion and Ecology, three actors are in play, namely humans, nature and the transcendental. None of these three actors should be emphasised at the

cost of the other. If humans are over-emphasised and made the most important partner in the triologue, it will end up in a humanistic understanding of human concern about the future in the sense of 'Shallow Ecology'. This will remain a conversation about humans and the utilitarian understanding of nature. Should nature be elevated to a higher level, it borders on the fringe of pantheism. Nature will then be put in a context of being quasi-religious. This will emphasise the concern for nature for the sake of nature. When the transcendental is made the primary partner, concern for nature might be understood as a moral act of people trying to please a higher power. Concern for nature then becomes the means in order to reach a higher goal of salvation or redemption.

Naturalism should not become a new religion to which all concerned with the environment subscribe to. Neither should Naturalism become a quasi-religion. Naturalism should not profess that concern with the environment is serving a higher purpose or acknowledging the divinity of nature. Neither should Naturalism suggest that environmental concern is the moral duty of humans.

This article wants to emphasise the way in which Naturalism portrays the unity between humans and nature. The concern with Naturalism should not be seen as being focussed on religion, but rather as emphasising the relationship between humans, nature and the transcendental. Once the relationship in this triologue of humans, nature and the transcendental is comprehended a new attitude towards nature is possible.

Notes

¹ This paper was presented at the ASRSA (Association for the Study of religion in Southern Africa) conference in Cape Town April 2014.

² Roger S. Gottlieb, *Religion and the Environment Vol 1-4*, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb, (New York: Routledge, 2010).

³ Mary Evelyn Tucker et al., *Buddhism and Ecology: The interconnection of dharma and deeds*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁴ Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford, *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the well-being of earth and humans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁵ Christopher K. Chapple and Mary E. Tucker, *Hinduism and Ecology: The intersection of earth, sky and water* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁶ Fazlun M. Khalid and Joanne O'Brien, *Islam and Ecology* (London: Cassell Publication, 1992).

⁷ Hava Tirosch-Samuels, *Judaism and Ecology: Created world and revealed word* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁸ John Grimm, *Indigenous traditions and Ecology: The interbeing of cosmology and community* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁹ For the lack of a better word, the term Durkheim (2008) uses to define reality is used.

¹⁰ Again using Durkheim's terminology.

- ¹¹ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge Classics, 2010), 55.
- ¹² Russell, 56.
- ¹³ Spinoza was known by his Hebrew name, Baruch, revealing his Jewish background, and later in his life by the Latin form of his name, Benedictus.
- ¹⁴ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 3.
- ¹⁵ Spinoza, 3.
- ¹⁶ Spinoza, 3.
- ¹⁷ Wolfgang Pleger, *Handbuch der Anthropologie: Die wichtigsten Konzepte von Homer bis Sartre* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2013), 84.
- ¹⁸ Spinoza, 4.
- ¹⁹ Pleger, 84.
- ²⁰ Pleger, 85.
- ²¹ Pleger, 85.
- ²² Pleger, 85.
- ²³ Russell, 330.
- ²⁴ Spinoza, 3.
- ²⁵ Spinoza, 7.
- ²⁶ Pleger, 75.
- ²⁷ Russell, 129.
- ²⁸ Russell, 143.
- ²⁹ Russell, 134.
- ³⁰ Russell, 134.
- ³¹ Pleger, 76.
- ³² Pleger, 77.
- ³³ Pleger, 78.
- ³⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Vorlesungen über das Wesen der Religion* (Stuttgart: Frommans Verlag, 1908), 116.
- ³⁵ David L. Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on sacred Ground*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).
- ³⁶ David L. Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on sacred Ground*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 3, 4.
- ³⁷ Barnhill and Gottlieb, 6.
- ³⁸ Feuerbach, 44.
- ³⁹ Feuerbach, 43.
- ⁴⁰ Feuerbach, 41, 98.
- ⁴¹ Feuerbach, 41.
- ⁴² Feuerbach, 99.
- ⁴³ Feuerbach, 99.
- ⁴⁴ Feuerbach, 42.
- ⁴⁵ This term is difficult to translate from the German. The technical more acceptable term would probably be “primal religion.”
- ⁴⁶ Feuerbach, 42.
- ⁴⁷ Feuerbach, 43.
- ⁴⁸ Feuerbach, 43.
- ⁴⁹ Feuerbach, 43.
- ⁵⁰ Expressions used by Feuerbach (2008: 46) emphasize the union between humans and nature: “Humans are dependent on nature ... humans exist in union with nature ... humans are children of nature ... humans are part of nature ... nature is

base and source of humans' existence ... nature is source for humans' well-being" (physical and spiritual).

⁵¹ Feuerbach, 46.

⁵² Feuerbach, 98.

⁵³ Feuerbach, 44-45.

⁵⁴ Feuerbach, 43.

⁵⁵ Feuerbach, 113.

⁵⁶ Feuerbach did react to the debate over Spinoza's views going on during his own lifetime. For Spinoza nature was god. Feuerbach does not agree with this statement but holds that god comes from nature.

⁵⁷ Feuerbach, 113.

⁵⁸ Joachim Kahl, "Ludwig Feuerbachs Beitrag zu einer Philosophie des Naturalismus," *Aufklärung und Kritik Sonderheft 3* (1999): 15-22, http://www.kahl-marburg.privat.t-online.de/kahl_if.pdf.

⁵⁹ Feuerbach, 21, 26.

⁶⁰ Feuerbach, 113.

⁶¹ Feuerbach, 114.

⁶² Feuerbach, 126.

⁶³ Feuerbach, 126.

⁶⁴ Feuerbach, 116.

⁶⁵ Feuerbach, 117.

⁶⁶ Feuerbach, 45.

⁶⁷ Feuerbach, 46.

⁶⁸ Feuerbach, 50.

⁶⁹ Feuerbach, 44.

⁷⁰ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1912]), 36.

⁷¹ Feuerbach, 44.

⁷² Feuerbach, 21, 26.

⁷³ Feuerbach, 21, 26.

⁷⁴ Feuerbach, 26.

⁷⁵ Feuerbach, 104.

⁷⁶ Feuerbach, 293.

⁷⁷ Feuerbach, 104.

⁷⁸ Feuerbach, 112.

⁷⁹ Feuerbach, 105.

⁸⁰ Feuerbach, 46.

⁸¹ Feuerbach, 106.

⁸² Feuerbach, 46-47, 112.

⁸³ Feuerbach, 109.

⁸⁴ Feuerbach, 108.

⁸⁵ Feuerbach, 109.

⁸⁶ Feuerbach, 46-47.

⁸⁷ Feuerbach, 47.

⁸⁸ It is not clear whether Feuerbach calls to mind the whole esoteric debate of the divine mother figure in nature. As he does not mention it, we cannot superimpose it here.

⁸⁹ Feuerbach, 47.

⁹⁰ Feuerbach, 127.

- ⁹¹ Feuerbach, 129.
- ⁹² Feuerbach, 129.
- ⁹³ Feuerbach, 130.
- ⁹⁴ Feuerbach, 26.
- ⁹⁵ Feuerbach, 26.
- ⁹⁶ Feuerbach, 25.
- ⁹⁷ Feuerbach, 25.
- ⁹⁸ Feuerbach, 138.
- ⁹⁹ Feuerbach, 45.
- ¹⁰⁰ Feuerbach, 45.
- ¹⁰¹ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (London: Methuen & Co, 1966), 125.
- ¹⁰² Weber, 125.
- ¹⁰³ Kahl, 15.
- ¹⁰⁴ Kahl, 16.
- ¹⁰⁵ Kahl, 18.
- ¹⁰⁶ Kahl, 19.
- ¹⁰⁷ Kahl, 19.
- ¹⁰⁸ Kahl, 20.
- ¹⁰⁹ Barnhill and Gottlieb, 17.
- ¹¹⁰ Barnhill and Gottlieb, 17.
- ¹¹¹ Barnhill and Gottlieb, 18.
- ¹¹² Barnhill and Gottlieb, 19.
- ¹¹³ Gal Kober, "For they do not agree in nature: Spinoza and Deep Ecology", *Ethics and The Environment* 18(1), (2013): 54.
- ¹¹⁴ Kober, 54.
- ¹¹⁵ Barnhill and Gottlieb, 19.
- ¹¹⁶ Kober, 54.
- ¹¹⁷ Barnhill and Gottlieb, 20.
- ¹¹⁸ Barnhill and Gottlieb, 23.
- ¹¹⁹ Donald A. Crosby, "Religion of Nature as a form of Religious Naturalism", in Donald A. Crosby (Ed.), *Living with Ambiguity: Religious Naturalism and the Menace of Evil* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 1.
- ¹²⁰ Donald A. Crosby, Religious Naturalism, in Chad Meister and Paul Copan (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2007), 744.
- ¹²¹ Crosby, "Religious Naturalism", 744.
- ¹²² Crosby, "Religion of Nature as a form of Religious Naturalism", 2.
- ¹²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Ordnung und Geheimnis* (München, 1948), 3.
- ¹²⁴ Crosby, "Religion of Nature as a form of Religious Naturalism," 2.
- ¹²⁵ Crosby, "Religion of Nature as a form of Religious Naturalism," 4.
- ¹²⁶ Pleger, 88.
- ¹²⁷ Pleger, 76.
- ¹²⁸ Due to the negative connotation the term materialism might hold in terms of its use in Marxism, Kahl (1999) suggests refraining from using this term.
- ¹²⁹ Kahl, 21.
- ¹³⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, "A common Earth Religion: World Religions from an Ecological Perspective," *Ecumenical Review*, Vol 63, number 1, (2011): 22.
- ¹³¹ Roger S. Gottlieb, *The Oxford Handbook on Religion and Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.
- ¹³² Kahl, 20.

¹³³ Kahl, 20.

¹³⁴ Kahl, 21.

¹³⁵ It is not in the scope of this article to elaborate on the possibilities of life after death.

¹³⁶ Moltmann, 22.

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