

The Ontological Status of Nature in the Era of Humanity

Lucie Kolářová

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Abstract

The text deals with the environmental crisis and how human culture can evolve regarding its attitude to the status of nature. Its aim is to consider how the status of nature can be adequately and justifiably characterised in the Anthropocene era, and this against the backdrop of postmodern changes in their relevant historical lines and perspectives. In this context, the Christian concept cannot be overlooked. The method is chronological concerning historical connections, yet the basic epistemological line is theoretical-systematic, hermeneutical, and based in synthesis. Regarding the issue of nature's autonomy, subject of reflection are the limits of a strictly specialist scientific discourse in relation to the complexity of the ongoing environmental crisis. The text aims to present ideas that may be inspiring for further work on the matter.

Keywords

status of nature, environmental crisis, progress, anthropocentrism, Christianity, Anthropocene, technological reduction, sustainability and sustainable development

Introduction

As topics of theoretical reflection, the ecological question, the environmental crisis, and the issue of the Earth's future unfold from what kind of status nature takes up in the current worldview of Western culture. Practical steps are necessarily bound to theoretical presumptions which need to be conceptualised. The text aims to think through how the status of nature can be adequately and justifiably characterised in postmodern culture in the era of the ongoing Anthropocene, and this against the background of changes in relevant historical lines and viewpoints. Taking into consideration the limited scope and the fundamental impossibility of treating such a topic in an exhaustive manner, we cannot but offer a tentative concept, a rough sketch, which will need further elaboration.

Method and Context

A chronological approach is used as far as historical facts are dealt with, yet the focal point is not on the level of historical data. The main epistemological line is a theoretical-systematic one,

synthesis being the preferred level of thinking. This is by no means a synthesis as a complete ‘theory of everything’, but rather a necessarily perspectivistic attempt at finding a unifying perspective which points beyond the existing dualism of scientific discussion and the dualism of science and life. Partial analyses and factual examples mainly serve to explain the intended connections. The text is primarily a hermeneutical work on well-defined topics; the ideas are based on Christian integral anthropology. The latter does not just imply the official teachings of the largest Christian tradition, the Catholic one, nor any other Christian denomination. If anything, it conveys the context of cultural Christianity, where Christianity and theology are understood as essential factors in the cultural memory of (not only) European societies – for instance by being aware of its overall history, referring to the Bible, maintaining certain values, by representing transcendence and defending it within educational and other institutes, by keeping hope for a complete life not measured by the possibilities of humankind, or by continually taking into consideration the welfare and misery of this culture, striving for mercy and bringing inspiration into society.¹ In the given context, I consider it legitimate that reflection which is not based on the key theorems of Christian orthodoxy entails, for example, creation as a culture-shaping concept.

Starting Point and Content

The text’s content refers to the key epochal change called the anthropological turn, which has been accompanied, since the 15th century – at the start implicitly – by a change of status for nature. In the past few centuries, this change has been a principal hotbed for ideas of what has, for humankind, come to mean progress, growth, and a rightly due future but has now given rise to environmental question and exclamation marks. In order to understand this change, the first part characterises the initial Christian concept, in which the interpretation of nature was still anchored at the start of modern times and against which the historical change can be distinguished. The second part thematises the status of nature in the context of the modern age and turns significant attention to the then technological paradigm and to the pattern of progress. The third part presents the principle of sustainability and so-called sustainable development as a possible programme for the future. In connection with the issue of the autonomy of nature, the text reflects the limits of a purely specialist scientific discourse in relation to the value of nature and also the complexity of the ongoing environmental crisis. The conclusion offers several incentives for contemplation.

0. Clarification of Terms

Specific terms used in the text can have a relatively wide scale of meaning.

Regarding the more and more problematic opposition of *natural* vs *artificial* (Aristoteles) the term ‘nature’ is understood as the comprehensive designation of everything that is, but not, however, as an absolute value, *ens perfectissimum*.² *Nature* and *natural* (*physis*, *natura*) are used in the sense that nature is something natural to the extent that it includes nothing supernatural. Neither does *natural* carry the connotation of *normal*, *normative*, *appropriate*. In the text, nature is further thought of as *creation* (Christian context) and as an object without its own purpose, determined for quantifying research and for gain (modern science and modern society, Anthropocene).

The term ‘anthropocentrism’ is simply meant as the concept in which humankind is the centre of the world and the purpose of all that happens, and this self-centred perspective is the valid

1 Cf. Roman A. Siebenrock, ‘Theologie als Wissenschaft – in Kirche und Gesellschaft: Thesen mit Erläuterungen’, in *Limina: Grazer theologische Perspektiven* 6, no. 2 (2023): 22–23.

2 Cf. Ulrich Lükke, *Das Säugetier von Gottes Gnaden: Evolution, Bewusstsein, Freiheit* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2016), 45–46.

measure of all assessment. In addition, a special kind of Christian anthropocentrism is mentioned separately (the so-called dominion mandate).

The ‘Anthropocene’, as a primarily geochronological term, indicating the fact that the human population substantially influences the state of the Earth’s surface, the hydrosphere and atmosphere, was introduced in 2000 retroactively to the era of the Industrial Revolution from the 18th century.³ The text uses the term in its first sense as an equivalent for the ‘era of humankind’, not as an agenda claim to the superiority of mankind, human individualism, and self-declared exceptionality. Although the term is not subjected to explicit criticism as incurred by the term Chthulucene (according to which Anthropocene offers no necessary narrative to enable the liberation from thought patterns and destructive behaviour for life in general),⁴ it is nevertheless confronted for its potential to bear and protect the ontological status of nature which would correspond to sustainable development.

‘Sustainability’ is understood as the kind of principle of thought and behaviour that is expressed towards life and nature – figuratively speaking – in a human attitude of the *good steward* and *shepherd* (slightly anthropocentric metaphors) and *sibling* (metaphor of a solidary environmental brotherhood).⁵ The term ‘sustainable development’ is sufficiently explained in the text. It is, however, essential to distinguish between *sustainability* and *sustainable development*, which can yet need not be synonyms; the principle of sustainability may under certain circumstances also mean stagnation or non-development, non-growth.

1. Historical Change of Viewpoints

1.1 Christian concept of creation

The Jewish-Christian tradition features no explicit theory of nature. Nor can we find in its main orientation a potential programme declaration regarding the status of nature. Nevertheless, the value of nature can be clearly identified in this tradition.

The Christian worldview states that the world as a whole – the universe, planet Earth, non-living and living nature including people – is the work of God. The world is created, God is the Creator. The notion ‘Creation’ itself indicates no causal mechanism of origin and shaping of the universe, the world, nature, life or consciousness, but ‘merely’ refers to the reason – accessible in faith – for the existence of everything. It is no empirical description of reality as we know from natural science; it is rather an expression of conviction that nature primarily occurs in a certain basic relational framework. Not in the least is it in a context without values. The revolutionary character of the original Jewish monotheism and the subsequent Christian concept consisted in a consequent distinction between God, people, and nature.⁶ As regards the status of nature, this means that it becomes an autonomous area, which allows for an objective approach. Neither humans nor nature are left at the mercy of magical powers; nature becomes “ordinary” nature. However, it is of cardinal importance that nature as such remains divine creation – the same way that an adult, independent person in all their freedom never ceases to be their parents’ child. This metaphor could

3 Regarding the term and publications, see: Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, ‘Working group on the Anthropocene’, accessed 6th January 2024, <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/>.

4 Cf. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

5 Cf. Hana Librová, *Věrní a rozumní: kapitoly o ekologické zpozdilosti* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2016), 62–71. Also cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*. *On Care for Our Common Home*, The Holy See, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, 221.

6 Cf. Dirk Ansorge and Medard Kehl, *Und Gott sah, dass es gut war: Eine Theologie der Schöpfung* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2018), 44–47, 127–129, 142–146.

be further elaborated upon. The concept of creation is also essentially about the simple acceptance of the complexity of everything we consider to be real, without the possible ‘false dialectics’ which we have too often seen in recent centuries.⁷

1.2 The loss of ontological plausibility

The simple conviction – simple in the best sense of the word and a matter of course since Christian antiquity – that the world in which we live is connected to God gradually loses its plausibility in Western modern cultural history. Yet, surprisingly enough, not even the 16th and 17th centuries, despite the ongoing secularisation of many of life’s domains, caused a weakening to the Christian theorem of belief in creation.⁸ Moreover, also the Enlightenment, otherwise questioning on principle the Christian category of revelation as a source of human (super)natural knowledge, acknowledges and leaves, in its deism, the ‘function of Creator’ to God.⁹ The fundamental turning point comes with Darwin’s hypothesis of evolution.¹⁰ There is much literature with detailed and profound analysis on this loss of the metaphysical vanishing point.¹¹ It is precisely here that the traditional framework to explain creation appears to fall to pieces. It is as if nature were once again secularised and this time for good. Without its relation to God, nature ceases to be creation, and falls out of its frame of values. There is no need to start talking about the proclamation and fulfilment of a kind of programmed progress, but de facto, nothing prevents nature from becoming spiritless matter, a mechanism, raw material, and indeed also – euphemistically speaking – ‘humankind’s environment’.¹²

Seen from the perspective of a lived practice, the difference may not be very obvious. Regardless of whichever worldview in history, people – with the possible exception of hunter-gatherers and their ‘low-impact lifestyle’ – have always cultivated and exploited nature, used and abused it.¹³ It stands to reason that also within the Christian worldview people can behave as usurpers. Admittedly, this is no argumentum ad rem. That is to say, the ontological status of nature remains the ultimate defining horizon of motivation, and therefore of the impacts of human behaviour. For that matter – unrelated to Christianity – it is exactly archaic people, living in a mythical worldview, that set a prototypical example of this, as there was no, especially *mental*, detachment

7 Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 121.

8 Natural scientists of the modern age were mostly practising Christians and frequently wrote their empirical treatises along with treatises on theology. It was, for example, the ambition of cartographer Gerard Mercator (1512–1594) to develop a complete cosmography in his *Atlas, sive Cosmographicae Meditationes de Fabrica Mundi et Fabricati Figura*, in which he dealt not only with astronomy, geography or history, but also with subjects like the creation, the history of salvation, and with Jesus Christ the Saviour of mankind and the universe. Cf. Lucie Kolářová, ‘Fyzikoteologie raného novověku a kartograf Gerhard Mercator coby teolog’, *Studia theologica* 18, no. 4 (2016): 39–44.

9 Cf. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: From Abraham to the Present: the 4000-year Quest for God* (London: Mandarin, 1996), 337–362.

10 This hypothesis has long complied with the parameters of a scientific theory, but from the perspective of the theory of science, its hypothetical character is preserved. Cf. Jan Zrzavý et al., *Jak se dělá evoluce: Labyrintem evoluční biologie* (Praha: Argo/Dokořán, 2017), 24–27.

11 For instance: Alister E. McGrath, *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology* (Oxford/Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), passim; Lükke, *Das Säugetier*, 107–144; Hans Kessler, *Evolution und Schöpfung in neuer Sicht* (Kevelaer: Topos plus, 2017), passim.

12 The sociologist H. Librová points out that the Czech compound ‘životní prostředí’ (literally ‘life environment’) is not self-evident, as *eo ipso* it downgrades nature’s own value by making it a function for the life of humans. The expression fits the attitude of the so-called eco-pragmatism. Cf. Librová, *Věrní a rozumní*, 100–101.

13 Hunters and gatherers from before the Neolithic Revolution were the last humans not to live on energy-credit. In contrast, the Industrial Revolution allows people through technological advance to acquire enormous overproduction and surpluses, which enable them to live on ecological credit (e.g., outside the season of vegetative growth), but when all energy consumption, costs of infrastructure, etc., are reckoned in, humankind unambiguously finds itself energy-wise in the red. This ‘deficit’ has been ‘attained’ for about 200 years, mainly because of storages of conserved energy, which, however, developed for hundreds of millions of years (fossil fuels) and this even multiplies humankind’s debt towards nature. Cf. Václav Bartuška, ‘Protancujeme se dějinami k dalšímu stupni blahobytu?’, in *Něco se muselo stát*, ed. Václav Cílek (Praha: Novela bohémica, 2014), 64–66. Also cf. Václav Cílek and Martin Kašík, *Nejistý plamen: průvodce ropným světem* (Praha: Dokořán, 2007), passim.

from nature¹⁴ and their undeveloped state of technology and minimalist intervention into the eco-system can thus be considered as secondary, respectively as resulting from basic ontology – admittedly this in itself is no guarantee for ‘goodness’ or morality.¹⁵ This was, for example, further represented by Celtic Christianity.¹⁶ And the complete opposite is illustrated by Western democracies that emerged from the self-confident modern spirit.¹⁷

This can be documented by the current issue of the position of animals today. Simply and solely from the ontological perspective, there is no – fundamental – difference between humans and animals;¹⁸ and on the contrary, for reasons of a really existing asymmetry, any other point of view goes against the recognition of autonomous animals, being independent of humans. As a matter of fact, there is plenty of literature mainly from the field of deep or integral ecology which is founded in the view that animals and nature itself have an intrinsic value.¹⁹ Despite the respectable number of schools of thought and alternative movements, they continue to be minority and often marginal projects and initiatives of which the effective strength has so far not managed to turn the direction of mainstream global capitalism and its conformism. With the widely present loss of the ontological anchor it can be observed that, in the current type of culture, we have evident difficulties in finding other than utilitarian justifications for the value of animals, or of nature. In the post-Christian era, the value of nature as such remains, on the whole, unreflected in the mainstream.²⁰

1.3 Exclusivity of modern anthropocentrism

The anthropological turn has brought a new emphasis on human affairs. Admittedly, a basic anthropocentric intention is already inherent in the Christian concept (Gn 1:26,28), the so-called dominion mandate, referred to by Lynn White as the root of the environmental crisis in Judaeo-Christian culture.²¹ Yet more recent critical analysis has shown that the rule of mankind means no dominance of power, but rather a service (*ráddáh*: caring rather than reigning; *kábaš*: protecting rather than dominating; *ábad*: serving rather than tilling; *šámar*: defending and respecting rather than guarding).²² The exclusiveness of humankind ‘created in God’s image’ is the exclusive responsibility for the

14 Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2019), 9–126.

15 Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 143–145.

16 Cf. Mary Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature: The Early Irish and Hebridean Traditions* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1996).

17 The modern era is here considered as the beginning of the Enlightenment, of which the thoughts were a vital inspiration for the social transformation of the feudal order, for the industrial revolutions, and economic liberalism.

18 Cf. Albert de Pury, *Člověk a zvíře – stvoření Boží: Starý zákon o zvířatech*, trans. Libuše and Dalibor Antalíkovi (Praha: Kalich, 1999), 73–74.

19 Cf. Arne Næss, ‘The Shallow and the Deep: Long-Range Ecology Movement’, *Inquiry* 16, no. 1–4 (1973): 95–100; cf. Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008); cf. Sean Esbjörn-Hargens and Michael E. Zimmerman, *Integral Ecology: Uniting Multiple Perspectives on the Natural World* (Boston: Integral Books, 2011).

20 Selected examples from the legislative field: several regulations on ‘non-living elements’ in the Czech Republic from 1945 to now. It is obvious from the titles of the separate regulations themselves that the value of non-living nature as such is not only not reflected but not even presupposed: Decree of the President of the Republic on the management of coal and firewood (115/1945 Coll.); Ordinance of the Czech Geological Council on the procedure of the search and exploration of exclusive deposits from the perspective of protection and rational use of mineral resources and on the notification of deposit occurrence of state-owned mineral reserves, its remuneration and on the payment of expenses (85/1988 Coll.); Government Decree of the Czech Socialistic Republic on the conditions of rational exploitation of deposits of non-state mineral reserves (92/1988 Sb.); Law on the disposal of carbon dioxide in natural rock structures and on the change of certain laws (85/2012 Sb.); Law that changes law number 85/2012 Coll., on the disposal of carbon dioxide in natural rock structures and on the change of certain laws in the wording of later regulations (193/2016 Coll.); Notice on tariff return for fees on the disposal of carbon dioxide in natural rock structures (161/2023 Coll.). Cf. *Zákony pro lidi*, ‘Neživé složky’, accessed 6th January 2024, <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/obor/nezive-slozky>.

21 Cf. Lynn White, ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’, *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–1207.

22 Cf. Andreas Lienkamp, ‘Mylně chápané pověření vládnout: biblické podněty pro křesťanskou teologii stvoření a etiku životního prostředí’, *Salve: revue pro teologii a duchovní život* 27, no. 4 (2017): 48–52. Cf. Andreas Lienkamp, ‘Herrschaftsauftrag und Nachhaltigkeit: Exemplarische Überlegungen zum Umgang mit der Bibel im Kontext theologischer Ethik’, in *Bibelhermeneutik und Christliche Sozialethik*, eds. Marianne Heimbach-Steins and Georg Steins (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2012), 187–216.

creation, of which it is itself a part and with which it is connected by mutual relations and bonds. It is a different matter that, when people act in conflict with their purpose and fail to fulfil their mandate or even misuse it – which is reflected in the Bible and classified as a sin (Gn 3ff) – then anthropocentrism ceases to be responsibility towards creation.²³

The manifesto of humanism *De dignitate hominis* from the beginning of the modern age puts up a different picture. Giovanni Mirandola places encouraging words to humankind into God's mouth: 'You, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. (...) in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer.'²⁴ The emphasis lies on man's own pursuit; people distinctly stand out in quality above the rest of creation. This is in accordance with the new concept of subject-object dualism: nature becomes that which spreads out (as the object) around humans (as the subject), in contrast to them.²⁵

Truly self-centred wording is then heard as of modern times with its emphasis on humanity's individual autonomy. The Enlightenment puts human reason on a pedestal, yet – seen through the eyes of Christian anthropology – it needs to be added critically that a realistic view on humankind is missing. People are elevated, and at the same time fundamentally reduced. Kohák speaks of the arrogance of Enlightened reason, to which 'mankind appeared to be the only source of all values and every sense, and therefore the unlimited lord and ruler of nature. Enlightened humankind does not take care of nature, but merely conquers and subjugates it.'²⁶ Thus the self-concept of humanity, which no longer considers itself God's creation, literally carbon-copies itself into the status of nature. As of the 19th century, humans – as independent units that are in a specific way reduced – are seen through an entire spectrum of specialist views and of indeed varied, often opposing schools of thought. Guardini notes that people are certainly not what they are made up to be by idealism, positivism, materialism, or even later by existentialism.²⁷ In this way, people cannot even fit onto isolated shelves of highly specialised discourses, of which the 'explanation' remains – subject to whichever methodology – necessarily mostly functional. Modern anthropocentrism seems to be indeed fundamentally different from the Christian *view of humankind* as the 'crown of creation'. For the ubiquitous absolutising of human perspectivity consequentially extracts humankind out of its life context – out of nature and the world as a whole.

2. The Role of Nature in the Modern Narrative

2.1 Progress as a performative programme

At the start of the modern age, the Enlightenment's pioneers and all the 'prophets' of the new humanity, new science and new knowledge, of the new society and the new state, perceived their situation as hopeful and the future as promising. What in Christian tradition fell under the notion of salvation becomes a matter of human pursuit, attainable in this world. Naturally then, the process of growth, anticipated by the Enlightenment, gets to be explicitly called progress in the 19th century.²⁸ The strength and striking power of the innovators' visions cannot be truly appreciated without a wider background of ideas, namely a secularised, immanentistic eschatology. The latter

23 Cf. also Michael Rosenberger, *Krone der Schöpfung? Ursprünge des christlichen Anthropozentrismus und Möglichkeiten seiner Überwindung* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2023).

24 Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. A. Robert Caponigri (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1956), 7.

25 Cf. Romano Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit. Die Macht* (Ostfildern/Paderborn: Grünewald/Schöningh, 2022), 30ff.

26 Erazim Kohák, *Člověk, dobro a zlo: o smyslu života v zrcadle dějin, kapitoly z dějin morální filosofie* (Praha: Ježek, 1993), 187.

27 Cf. Guardini, *Das Ende*, 47ff.

28 Cf. Kohák, *Člověk, dobro a zlo*, 176–178.

involves more than the principal expectation of a qualitatively better future. *Progress* is a core conviction, a worldview. Profane human behaviour and actions, considered nearly fateful, gain a quasi-sacral value.²⁹

The global state of technological advance of the 21st century and its culture of consumerism³⁰ can be legitimately applied to the modern Western programme of progress. It almost prevents humankind from being regarded as part of nature, even if at the same time it is perceived, thus far unseen, as biologically determined. As of the 19th century, in the eyes of secularised society, nature has once and for all ‘fallen out of’ not only the theological (creation) but also the philosophical framework and become the subject of highly successful natural science.³¹ It would, however, be a mistake to assume that the new science finds itself in a valueless vacuum.

Enlightened science [...] distinguishes itself from the older periods by what it condemns as non-scientific: by its philosophical perception of the world. This is not what science ‘discovers’ but what it presupposes. It presumes a purely material and mechanical world in which causality becomes the only principle of organisation. Without distinction, it rejects both miracle and sense. What remains is technology. Modern science is a science of working people, one that is practical and useful; not a science of those who meditate about the world.³²

As a mechanism which has been since Newton defined mathematically, nature becomes the subject of scientific observation. It is simply reduced to perfectly natural nature, accessible only to reason.³³ There is nothing confusing or irrational, nothing that is potentially inaccessible or forbidden to people. A view of nature as a spiritless machine is more or less consistent with mechanistical anthropology. Particular examples of elite thinkers that have managed throughout Modern times to combine scientific research and philosophical reflection (for that matter even Isaac Newton) do not change much within the basic cultural orientation.

The concept of progress appears to be no result of an inevitable historical movement, merely used to describe this movement, but rather a semantic concept which is close to a *programme*. It is neither free of presumptions nor expectations. It is connected to a type of utopic thinking,³⁴ which has, in the past centuries, led to numerous strongly effective projects depicting (and even constructing) a new and presumed better social reality. A fitting example of this is the ecological utopia by Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston*.³⁵

2.2 The problem of technological reduction

In the context of a strengthened rationalism and subject-object dualism as the basis of modern natural sciences, also technology was understood as a chance, again exclusively for humanity. Despite the undisputable benefits of technical science for a qualitative improvement in people's lives,³⁶ the question has now emerged of the price that has had to be paid for progress, clearly

29 Cf. Bedřich W. Loewenstein, *Víra v pokrok: dějiny jedné evropské ideje* (Praha: Oikymenh, 2009), 83, 97, 219f.

30 Cf. Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermoderní doba: od požitku k úzkosti*, trans. Barbora Holá (Praha: Prostor, 2013), 35f. Cf. Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: HarperCollins, 2021), passim.

31 Cf. Konrad Paul Liesmann, *Hodnota člověka: filosoficko-politické eseje*, trans. Jiří Fiala and Jan Frei (Praha: Malovaný kraj, 2010), 29.

32 Kohák, *Člověk, dobro a zlo*, 184.

33 Cf. Kohák, *Člověk, dobro a zlo*, 178f.

34 Cf. Thomas Schölderle, ‘Ikonografie der Utopie. Bilderwelten und ihr Symbolgehalt im utopischen Diskurs der Frühen Neuzeit’, in *Neue Diskurse der Gelehrtenkultur in der Frühen Neuzeit*, eds. Herbert Jaumann and Gideon Stiening (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), 507–562.

35 Cf. Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia: the Notebooks and Reports of William Weston* (New York: Bantam, 1975), passim.

36 Cf. Ingeborg Gabriel, ‘Ekologie jako otázka “nového člověka”: antropologické a sociálně-etické úvahy’, *Salve: revue pro teologii a duchovní život* 27, no. 4 (2017): 67–68.

one-sidedly. Technical applications of theoretical knowledge combined with technical-economic processes have, at the latest from the first industrial revolution, been accompanied by massive economic growth, which, however, is assessed by Johan de Tavernier from an environmental point of view as degradation of nature. In technological, more and more depersonalised processes, nature becomes material for production, space for both production and waste storage. Moreover, waste occurs during production as well as consumption. De Tavernier draws attention to what is called the 'tragedy of the commons':³⁷ water is used up, air polluted, but the cost of the damages incurred by pollution and emissions are carried neither by the producer nor by the consumer. The necessary existing connection between (economic) growth and the 'consumption' of nature, he writes, is evidence that the current environmental crisis has indeed all the traits of a social conflict.³⁸

According to Sokol, it is at the latest from the 19th century that technical science comes, unnoticed, under pressure and rule of the economy, which defines to a significant extent what is – measured by financial criteria – possible, beneficial, and desirable.³⁹ The continuing waves of industrial revolution seem to further intensify this clenching of technological-economic gears. Processes that have already happened and are still – on higher levels of advancement and complexity – under way (mechanisation, electrification, motorisation, automation, chemicalisation, robotisation, bionisation, digitalisation) can provide an easy alibi, not in the least for the subjection of nature. Nevertheless, humanity remains responsible, especially when it comes to seemingly anonymised processes, institutions or, for that matter, the so-called free market. For again here, it is all entangled with the personal responsibility of human beings.⁴⁰

Progress that is carried by a vision of building the future is decidedly no indicator of neutrality nor, apparently, of innocence. To say the least, nature pays a heavy – and most visible – price for the idea of progress. From an integral viewpoint, including the anthropological and environmental perspective, progress can never be seriously reduced to mere technical development. Never could it have been only about the 'technical side of things' and quantity, but also and mainly about the anthropological background as well as about what is nowadays exactly meant with the environmental context: about human ingeniousness, about creativity and courage, about the already mentioned connection of values, about beauty and what is good, about (non)solidarity and – newly – about respect for nature and nature for its own sake. The fact that in the modern age narrative most of the given aspects have not for a long time been conceptualised in connection with progress, in no way means they do not exist and have no effect at all. Then as well as now, humans are the only ones who manage to identify meanings, intentions and values that are hidden precisely in technological processes, and differentiate them and treat them in an appropriate way. Evidence of this can well be found in the current environmental sensitivity, sprung up in the culture of technological bedazzlement, a sensitivity that explicitly reveals the consumer role attached to nature, calls it by its true name and rejects it as reductive and misrepresented.

3. The Principle of Sustainability

3.1 Under the burden of responsibility

When we speak today of the Anthropocene as the human era, we talk undoubtedly about the world as defined from an anthropocentric perspective. When looking for a solution how to combine

37 On the issue of global public goods, cf. Bedřich Moldan, *Podmaněná planeta* (Praha: Karolinum, 2015), 421–424.

38 Cf. Johan de Tavernier, *De broosheid van het zinvolle* (Leuven: Acco, 2011), 155.

39 Jan Sokol, *Malá filosofie člověka. Slovník filosofických pojmů* (Praha: Vyšehrad, 2010), 149.

40 Cf. Konrad Hilpert, *Zentrale Fragen christlicher Ethik: für Schule und Erwachsenenbildung*, (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2009), 18–24.

human development with nature's autonomy in a sustainable way both in the present and for the future, it seems to be an impossible task for people to step out of this perspective in one way or another and adopt a perspective which ranks them on the same level as other biotic systems and denies their privileged position in nature. Although the biocentric conception would have the advantage of, by definition, applying an ethical value of nature to all things living and it would therefore be impossible for the human attitude to nature not to have a moral quality, this biocentric conception would not be able to acknowledge people's reflective consciousness as a specific and peculiar category in the domain of living nature.⁴¹ Radical biologism can justify the value of an individual phenotype just as little as of any other subject.⁴² Nonetheless, people seem to be the only 'teleological centre of life'⁴³ that is credited with a moral responsibility for their own actions. If we cannot relinquish this anthropologically fundamental state of moral liability, then consequently – when disputing the modern programme of progress – this requires humankind to transform its own anthropocentric disposition in favour of a model that takes into account nature's autonomous value, even if only humankind itself articulates and defends it.

The notion of *sustainability* semantically indicates in that direction. It is symptomatic that, while the so-called ecological critique⁴⁴ became a point of public and specialised debates already in the 1970s, *sustainability* has been an explicit topic of the environmental discourse only in the past few decades, when, in the eyes of specialists, the state of nature appears to be practically unsustainable and alarming.⁴⁵ The term *sustainable development* can be understood as a synonym of progress which can be responsibly implemented and newly explained not just for Western culture but on a planetary scale. It can be justifiably classified as an opposing concept to the destructive dynamics of progress that is conceived – recklessly from the environmental perspective – as unlimited growth of material and intellectual goods and assets for humankind.⁴⁶ Again we are dealing with a performative term with a clearly ethical connotation, for sustainability evidently and necessarily implies responsibility.

3.2 The limits of scientific rationality

The complexity and diverse impacts of the current environmental crisis indicates that it is no longer possible to reduce nature to the subject of scientific observation. Even just a content analysis of the considered concepts (progress, anthropocentrism, environmental crisis, sustainability, sustainable development) exceeds the scope of a purely specialist understanding. Humanity relates to nature as an entity living in the middle of it, neither above nor outside it, and this even if it culturally transforms it.⁴⁷ For humans, the given relationship proceeds primarily within an existential, not within a specialist or scientific framework; never can the coexistence of nature and humans be entirely objectivised. The strict methodology of the 'classical' natural science disciplines (physics, biology, chemistry) enables us to gain objective expertise with regards to content and thus to understand how nature works. Research is relatively independent of morality, emotions, formative intentions, subjective approaches, and opinions. The presented conclusions are nevertheless always only partial reports concerned with partial aspects, whereas people, in reality, have to deal with complex phenomena with which our lives are firmly interconnected.

41 Cf. Josef Petr Ondok, *Člověk a příroda: hledání etického vztahu* (Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 1998), 25–28.

42 Cf. Jean-Claude Wolf, *Tierethik: neue Perspektiven für Menschen und Tiere* (Erlangen: Harald Fischer, 2005), 58.

43 Term by Taylor, who uses it in an egalitarian sense for whichever individual organism. Cf. Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 99–168.

44 Cf. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

45 Cf. Moldan, *Podmaněná planeta*, 337–343, 352–360, 441f.

46 Cf. Moldan, *Podmaněná planeta*, 334, 337, 467–468.

47 Cf. Josef Šmajš, *Kultura proti přírodě: tři ekologické eseje* (Brno: Zvláštní vydání, 1994), 37–41f.

In recent years, we have seen the emergence of a whole spectrum of new expert borderline disciplines, auxiliary sciences, or applied research fields that combine various methodological procedures (waste management and raw material treatment; rights of the environment; Green Social Work⁴⁸).⁴⁹ The trend towards multi-disciplinarity – a higher level of content openness, permeability, and flexibility across various discourses and a search for adequate methodology – reveals at least an increased sense of mutual connectedness and the unworkability of assigning *sustainability* in its entirety to only one specialist discourse.

The advantages of a (technical-)scientific approach, relative objectivity, detachment, and the absence of value-laden standpoints, can, on the other hand, be read as a basic deficit regarding the programme of sustainability. For it is principally not possible to transfer the fundamental complexity of the whole matter to the level of only rationalisation, however sophisticated it may be. This is no complexity of a mere cognitive character. Nature is not a spiritless machine, but rather a complex interactive structure.⁵⁰ People are no rational machines and in order to live they need a motivation and must activate a will, not only as individuals but also as members of human society. Kohák aptly captures the fundamental lack of the modern scientific approach to nature in a situation of crisis: 'Objective and systematic analysis remains rhetorical, if there is no civic will for implementation.'⁵¹ From a not too distant history, we can refer to the case of well-known studies, *The Limits to Growth* (1972) and *Beyond the Limits* (1992),⁵² which represented, in their time and in the best sense of the word, the systematic fact-based approach to the issue of the ecological crisis. There is no mention of love for nature. It contains purely factual wording, calculations and statistical data, and the observation that the current conduct of Western civilisation is not sustainable in the long run. Even though the Club of Rome (in existence since 1968 and initiators of both texts) had and still has an undoubtable impact, the technocratic and economic paradigm has decidedly not been weakened by it, nor have well-established and often harmful social and economic processes by any means been abandoned. The principle of sustainability is not just a theoretical category, for it is at the same time a practical principle of conduct. As such it does not ensue from 'hard facts' but from a basic existential, ethically outlined attitude of humankind. Objectivistic approaches remain significant tools for the ecological solution, yet they are not the fuel to start processes of revitalisation.

3.3 Complexity is the challenge

In the meantime, parameters that are measurable in nature are becoming more and more exact and everything points to the fact that global humanity faces the necessity of a fundamental turn in the way it uses the Earth's natural and cultural riches.⁵³ An ecologically conscientious attitude aimed at sustainability dramatically transforms the criteria of what is considered progress. As said before, it is a kind of development that is sustainable in the long term, without exhausting unrenewable reserves of all kinds or prospering on credit. When thinking this through consistently, this may even mean, for various domains and depending on the circumstances, a *sustainable retreat*,

48 Cf., for instance, Lena Dominelli, *Green Social Work: From Environmental Crises to Environmental Justice* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

49 Cf. Moldan, *Podmaněná planeta*, 75–76, 119, 343.

50 Cf. Humberto Maturana: *Reflections on Bringing Forth Worlds*, eds. Frederick Steier and Pille Bunnell (Upton Pyne: Imprint Academic, 2023), *passim*.

51 Erazim Kohák, *Zelená svatozář: kapitoly z ekologické etiky* (Praha: Karolinum, 2023), 173.

52 Cf. Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972). Cf. Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows and Jorgen Randers, *Beyond the Limits: Confronting Global Collapse, Envisioning a Sustainable Future* (Post Mills/Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 1992).

53 Cf. Moldan, *Podmaněná planeta*, 470–471.

as mentioned by Lovelock.⁵⁴ From the viewpoint of quality, progress can then even be classified as a programme of limited consumption, non-growth, or voluntary modesty. Examples of both individual and communal practice are available⁵⁵ and provide many models worth following, but the global crisis requires a global systemic arrangement.

The question of nature's status seems to be of vital importance. In an age of inexhaustible numbers of exact and detailed analyses, humanity lacks a common unifying perspective that would enable effective and global action. Postmodernity has given up on meta-narratives and all-encompassing stories: plurality is the slogan of our age.⁵⁶ The need for a unifying perspective can only be fulfilled by tapping into reality and by acknowledging its complexity, and it is precisely fragmentary knowledge that can lead to ignorance unless it makes provision for the broader reality.⁵⁷ Solving dilemmas – between objectivity and subjectivity, theory and practice, the individual and society – has evidently outlived its usefulness. Many people instigate a turn to ecology, which could well be, in the Anthropocene, a source of strength to protect nature's fundamental values against (self-)destruction by the human community. A green ideology is hardly what is meant here, but rather a cultivation of humanity's basic attitude towards nature and the world, the ability to stand up against exploitation, resignation, and indifference. Nowadays, this role does not in principle depend upon people's worldview or religion. Still, the question remains in earnest which sources could be broached for this new consciousness.

From the position of Christian theology, Celia Deane-Drummond speaks of *EcoSpirit*:

It recognises that facts alone about environmental issues are not enough; what is needed is something more elemental, that probes the background assumptions pervading modern thought in a way that leads to denial – what the editors term 'apocalyptic insomnia'. Such sensitivity to context echoes something of the concerns in other contextual theologies. In the main, eco-theology turns against the tide of radical postmodern relativism (...) in that it accepts that environmental problems have a substantial and reasonable basis in reality. At their best, postmodern critiques show up the limitations of scientific analysis and theological dogmas. Eco-theology can survive such criticism by also challenging the secular idea that the sciences are sufficient to solve environmental problems. Moreover, I suggest that even at a secular level the various forms of eco-theology need to be viewed as important contributions to myth making and symbol making, where 'myth' is not intended to imply the lack of truth, but rather shows its capacity to reach beyond the rational to include other dimensions of knowing.⁵⁸

For religious thought and practice formed, according to Deane-Drummond, part of the roots of the environmental problem and also continue to be a legitimate part of potential solutions.⁵⁹

Conclusion

The status of nature in human history presents itself as variable. The Jewish-Christian liberalisation of nature, which started around the first millennium BC, enabled the understanding of nature as a worldly, non-sacral space of which the ontological value was, however, for a long

54 Cf. James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth Is Fighting Back – and How We Can Still Save Humanity* (Santa Barbara/California: Allen Lane, 2006).

55 For the Czech Republic, see Librová, *Věrní a rozumní*, 104–106, 159–292.

56 Cf. Wolfgang Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 263–276, 319–328.

57 Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 117f, 121.

58 Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (Winona: Anselm Academic, 2008), 11.

59 Cf. Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*, 11ff.

time, theologically guaranteed. With the anthropological turn in modern Western history, it was natural that the anthropomorphic and anthropocentric perspective of human perception, taken out of its theocentric context, gradually became an exclusive and merely horizontal perspective. For the modern age, as of the Enlightenment, the programme of progress was identified as essential. Nature's status is revealed as subservient. Within a functional-pragmatical framework, which gets to be more and more technocratic, there seem to be insufficient potent instruments of thought for reflection on the autonomy of nature as a vital and inevitable value of contemporary civilisation.⁶⁰ In industrial societies, nature is degraded to raw material and space for production, and space for waste dumping from both production and consumption processes. Techno-science, in the grip of economic interests as of the 19th century, provides know-how for ideas and applications which further support and help create the concept of progress. Nature is submitted to the interests of humankind and this is taken as legitimate. Nevertheless, the changeability of nature's status in history fortunately means a chance for change, too.

In times when the modern concept of progress is disputed and the environmental susceptibility relatively awakened, *sustainability* presents the principle which may enable the practical effectuation of a kind of justifiable development that is also feasible in all responsibility. The question is as follows: Which ideas and values should be and are permitted to be used as foundation for this principle? Objectivistic approaches of the specialist scientific discourse remain a significant analytical tool to solve ecological problems, but, at the same time, their reductivity obstructs from grasping the complexity of the environmental crisis. From an integral anthropological perspective, all indications suggest that, as long as nature figures in the plans of humanity as a functional space more or less empty of values, then no potential is created for its renewal. Yet – despite praiseworthy and long-term efforts to negotiate binding international environmental treaties⁶¹ – global civilisation seems to lack an internally anchored and commonly shared ability for a unifying perspective in this critical situation. The mentioned legislation will clearly be hardly effective without the support in a culture which, through a specific lifestyle, creates conditions for environmental sensitivity, alertness, and awareness. Any systemic defence of nature appears to be arduous if the status of nature lacks a supporting foundation that is both obvious to and accepted by the wider public. Development towards a unifying perspective presupposes – on a global level – the ability of at least elementary agreement on how to define universal human interests in a state of environmental emergency. It is evident that consistent and rigorous debate cannot in the end fail to get to the ontological level of the problem, since human interests are always led by fundamental values and basic convictions of human societies and are connected to elemental human certainties on the meaning and purpose of their lives and of life in general.⁶² However, it is precisely at this level that the big question arises of what might be that ultimate substantiation for appropriate cooperative action by all of humanity.

The environmental crisis and the issues of human development and the Earth's future require all contexts to be taken into account. In traditional Christian wording, synthetic thinking should be focused on the task of getting closer to the state of ontological equal rights for the whole of creation, in relation to each other. Furthermore, the concept of nature as creation contains, even outside its original context, universally plausible meanings – for example, the fact that it does not

60 Nor does the solution seem to be an emotional glorification of nature's beauties or a connected romantic 19th century sentiment which meet with, to say the least, ambivalent reactions in critical analyses. Cf. Librová, *Věrní a rozumní*, 29–30, 128.

61 A first treaty *Antarctic Treaty System* was already negotiated in 1959. For an overview of treaties, cf. Moldan, *Podmaněná planeta*, 430–434.

62 Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *Gott in der Schöpfung. Ökologische Schöpfungslehre* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993), 37.

remove nature out of its relational or value framework. This could even present an inspiration and a challenge in the contemporary postmodern culture. From an anthropocentric perspective, the status of nature only has a chance of transformation if being conscious of our responsibility to nature becomes a moral duty for humankind. Even this is understandably not without a risk. In the ecological ethics discourse, Medard Kehl speaks of, among others, responsibility motivated by gratefulness and responsibility as (eschatological) composure.⁶³ In other words, this would mean that being aware of the fact that the world which is at our disposal can neither be taken as a matter of course nor be had on demand, that this consciousness must be accompanied by trust and humility which will not allow humanity to absolutise even its own responsibility. Care for nature proves to be an expression of maturity of an adult person who understands freedom as loving thoughtfulness which cannot create a 'new creation' but can instead make the Earth a place where it is good to live.

Contact:**Lucie Kolářová, Dr. Theol.**

University of South Bohemia

Faculty of Theology

Department of Theological Disciplines

Kněžská 8, 370 01 České Budějovice

kolaroval@tf.jcu.cz

63 Cf. Ansorge and Kehl, *Und Gott sah*, 425–428, 432–436.