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PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE AND CULTURE AND ITS ROLE IN SHAPING HUMANKIND'S ATTITUDE TO NATURE

We live in an era of crises. One of them, the ecological crisis, arose from the fact that the human race plunders nature, destroying, among other things, the Earth's biodiversity. Below I will first show (Part one) that the situation is rooted in a specific worldview. In the next step (Part two) I will interrogate the question of how we can deal with the problem.

Humans' attitude toward themselves and to the world (including understanding of nature and its treatment) is based on beliefs and values of which they are not entirely aware [cf. Pobjewska 1987, Latour, Polish ed. 2009, chap. 1, p. 58, French ed. 2004]. Individuals absorb them in the process of socialization, as they assimilate the widely understood traditions of the social group to which they belong. Many philosophers and ecologists [Bogusławski, 2011, Ferry 1992, 1993: 40, Latour 2009, Pobjewska 1987] believe that in the European culture the **main line of thinking** about humans' place in the world and their relation to nature, which has been dominant since the beginning of the modern era (the seventeenth century), was **developed by René Descartes** (1596-1650). It culminated certain trends in the European thought. However, instead of tracing the origins of this position, I will limit my remarks to the discussion of its features particularly relevant to my thesis.

1. Cartesian vision of the relationship between humanity and nature

The relationship between humans and nature in Descartes hinges, in the first place, on the specifically formulated **ontological dualism**. This view assumes the existence of two substances making up reality—the **body and the soul**.

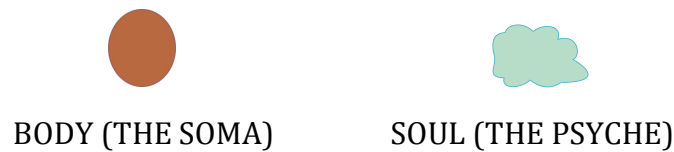


Figure 1. A model of reality based on ontological dualism. The body and the soul, which are substantively distinct, that is,

- are separate from each other (the body can exist without the soul and the soul can exist without the body);
- their attributes and functions are completely different (an attribute of one entity cannot describe the other one).

Their substantive difference lies in that they exist independently, and their attributes, functions and properties are entirely different. Such a vision of the world has dominated the European philosophy since their beginnings, but **it was Descartes who drew an specific demarcation line between the soma and the psyche**. In the Greek tradition **the soul is responsible for life**. As a result, the distinction between the soul and the body boils down to the distinction between animate and inanimate nature. Humans along with all animate creatures belong to the community of entities with soul. Having a soul is an attribute of humans, animals and plants which sets them apart from all inanimate nature. Descartes, on the other hand, associates **the soul with consciousness and thinking, whereas life as such becomes an attribute of all bodies**. He understands the body as a mechanism, which subjected, unambiguously and necessarily, to the laws of nature (determinism). As a result of these distinctions, humans as creatures with souls—that is, as capable of thought—are set apart from creatures without soul, having bodies and incapable of thought. Between humans and nature, both animate and inanimate, an unbridgeable gap opened up; humans stand alone *vis-à-vis* the rest of creation.





GREEK TRADITION		CARTESIAN TRADITION	
ensouled beings  (animate beings)	unensouled beings  (inanimate nature)	ensouled beings  (thinking beings)	unensouled beings  (non-thinking beings)
plants animals humans	inanimate bodies	humans	inanimate bodies plants animals

Figure 2. Greek and Cartesian relationship of man to the world determined by the possession of the soul or by its lack.

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In the context of humans' relation to nature, Descartes takes a crucial step in using the **category of the subject** in an anthropological sense, i.e. **he refers it exclusively to man**. Earlier, following Aristotle's conceptions, the subject was understood in metaphysical meaning as the foundation of being, the carrier of all qualities, states and functions of each thing [Heidegger 1962]. Descartes, on the other hand, associates subjectivity not only with autonomous existence but also with individual, sovereign activity. In other words, the subject exists independently and is capable of autonomous actions which he takes of his own volition; he can perform them or not, because he is not predetermined to do so (as is the case with realms where the rules of nature apply).

Descartes' other concepts regarding the man-nature relation are as follows:

First, apart from his contending that man has body and soul, Descartes places subjectivity **exclusively in the realm of soul**. Thus, if only humans have souls [Descartes 1637: part IV], other **living beings**

(animals and plants) are denied the status of the subject (they are just objects).

Second, Descartes does not ascribe to subjectivity the whole sphere of thinking, which comprises doubting, comprehending, perceiving, affirming, negating, willing, imagining and sensing. According to him, only **intellectual powers** pertain to the subject and he excludes from this volition, imagination, passions, or perception [Descartes 1641, meditation VI]. Thus, he eliminates not only corporeality from the sphere of subjectivity, but also areas of soul related to emotions or imagination. This results in the conclusion that **not the whole man is the subject and not the whole of human consciousness is the subject**, but a part of human consciousness responsible for rational, scientific cognition. **Cartesian subject is the cognitive subject and its function is the rational, scientific cognition.**

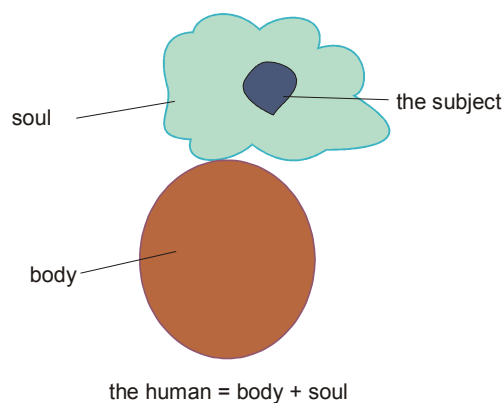


Figure 3. The location of subjectivity in a diagram showing the Cartesian model of a human being

Third, Descartes' **category of subjectivity has an axiological dimension**—it is presented as having a positive value, which results in valorising the rational part of man (because it is equated with the subject). All that is not the subject, that is a-rational, pertains to objectivity which is at the same time inferior to the subject. It confers **an axiological advantage to the rational aspect of mind not only over body but also over nonrational spheres of consciousness** (volition, emotions, imagination, experience, etc.). As a consequence, the value of the whole nature and life is belittled, as are humans

considered “less rational,” i.e. women and children, and representatives of those cultures, in which rational cognition is regarded as neither the essence of humanity nor the basic mode of relating humanity to the world. According to Descartes’ conception, only an educated, European male fulfils the condition of being a fully human subject. Cognitive subjectivity is associated with legal and moral subjectivity, that is to say, only the subject is entitled to legal protection and it is the subject that is under moral obligations. In his or her attributes and value (as a being and axiologically), the human is juxtaposed to nature¹.

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Descartes’ **anthropocentric and rationalist view of the subject** has become one of the most pivotal notions of the European philosophy [Renaut 1989, partie I]. It is on the strength of this conception that the human as a cognising mind is at the top of the chain of being. Engaging in his activity as the subject essential to his being, that is, scientific cognition, **he takes control of himself and nature**. With the onset of modernity, and the rise of mathematical physics and the recognition of the practical function of scientific knowledge (*episteme*) (“we can do as much as we know”, F. Bacon 1561-1626), science is no longer limited to facilitating the understanding of the world, but also provides **tools for action**. In a short time people developed a huge array of inventions (e.g. optical devices, barometer, steam engine, etc.), which have made our life considerably easier. The **belief in the omnipotence of science** arises; that science will let us explore nature in great depth and subjugate it. Nature becomes shorn of all mystery (what Max Weber called “the disenchantment of nature”); it now seems it is in the power of natural sciences to bring about a complete penetration of nature. We are seeing an optimistic and **blind faith in scientific progress**; many think it is inconceivable that such progress can bring negative consequences [cf. Ferry 1992].

¹ The subsequent two centuries bring the modification of nature’s antithesis. It is no longer soul, which transcends the body in the individual self. Increasingly the antithesis of nature lies in culture, transcending nature in collective consciousness. This major shift took place in the 19th century, when the notion of culture in its anthropological meaning, used for the first time by E. Tylor, finally crystallizes [Kroeber, Kluckhohn 1952].

Such conception of the human and his attitude to nature discussed above is not just the domain of philosophy, but affects **human consciousness at large far beyond philosophy**, dominating the way Europeans think and act. Following this conception they conquer nature, use it to their own purposes, to satisfy their growing needs. They **exploit, destroy and modify nature** and they do so without any scruples of conscience, because they deny it any subjectivity, because it doesn't have a soul, or because it doesn't think (or feel). It follows that nature is not protected by any laws or norms. It's a nonsentient thing (an object)².

Presently, in the era of globalisation, the Cartesian way of thinking and behaving, typical for Europeans, has spread over the entire globe which will lead to an ecological disaster.

Part 2. Preventive measures

What should we do? How can we put an end to the ongoing devastation of nature? The cooperation between politicians and environmentalists so far has not produced satisfactory results, because politicians largely represent the interests of their own nations or social groups, somehow neglecting problems of more general nature [Serres 2009]. Maybe we should begin again from a different end altogether—that is to say, from a radical transformation of people's attitudes toward nature. Here philosophy can perform an important role, because every vision of the world is a notional construct [Pobjewska 1987]. (Here, for instance, I've just shown how our world hinges on theoretical distinctions made by Descartes as regards the relationship between humans and nature.) **Philosophy can offer a vision of the world in which humans have a friendly attitude toward nature.**

Pro-ecological worldview should be based on humans' **recognition of their kinship with nature**. But this sense of kinship

² Until quite recently in the legal systems of many countries (in Poland, for instance, until the end of the 1990s) animals had the status of inanimate things. By treating them as things, all legal obstacles to animal testing were automatically removed.

should not just be limited to the sense of sharing in one being. The case of evolutionism is highly pertinent here. Notice that genetic (or biological) continuity between humanity and the animate nature has not fundamentally altered the attitude of the Europeans toward their non-human progenitors ("our younger brothers"). The new desirable transformation of our attitude to nature requires **new axiological foundations**. We should propose a new hierarchy of values which would have the effect of making humans less distinguished and would not juxtapose humans to the rest of the world, as it was the case of the Cartesian concept. A new axiological order should realign humans and nonhuman creatures and set new objectives for human actions which would not be exploitative but rather would rely on a symbiotic relationship with them. These re-evaluations should effect major modifications of moral and legal obligations. Only then can we hope to see a real change in humans' attitude toward nature.

The solutions proposed to Europeans should not be entirely alien to their traditions, nor should they be hard to reconcile with the semantic apparatus of the European culture. Only projects which are culturally related to the European traditions have the chance of being well understood, accepted and assimilated. However, given the situation described above we are not entirely helpless, for in the twentieth-century European thought we do find a philosophical position which meets our requirements. We discover pro-ecological intellectual foundations in the conception of a German thinker and philosopher Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944). Inspired by Kant's epistemological ideas, Uexküll treats every living being as the subject, **and identifies the foundations of subjectivity in a specifically understood *a priori***³. If then in Descartes subjectivity sets the human world apart from the world of animals, in Uexküll it is subjectivity that brings those two worlds together.

³ For more on the position of Jakob von Uexküll, see my other publications on the subject: "Die Subjektlehre Jacob von Uexkülls" *Sudhoffs Archiv*, Band 77, Heft 1 (1993), pp. 54-71; "New biology — Jakob von Uexküll's Umweltlehre," Walter de Gruyter *Semiotica* 2001, no. 134 1/4, pp. 323-39.

CONCEPTION OF DESCARTES		CONCEPTION OF J. v. UEXKÜLL	
World of subjects	World of objects	World of subjects	World of objects
humans	animals plants inanimate objects	humans animals plants	inanimate objects

Figure 4. The composition of the world of subjects and objects in the conceptions of Descartes and Jacob von Uexküll

If **every living being is the subject**, a question arises about the meaning of the term “subject”. Uexküll attributes subjectivity to all living beings, because they perceive and act (*merken und wirken*) [Uexküll 1921: 4]. Someone might say that the same can be said of machines, that they too perceive and act. (After all, when you push a key on the keyboard an image appears on the computer screen). True, but machines are nothing but objects because their operations are heteronomous, that is, they are possible only because they were conceived and developed by a constructor. On the other hand, true subjects have not been designed by any such engineer, **their activity is fully autonomous**, they receive specific external stimuli and respond to them in a way which is **characteristic of them** [Uexküll 1931: 346].

For the subject's sovereign activity to take place, there has to be, prior to all experience, an apriori form which Uexküll called the **plan of construction** (*der Bauplan*)⁴. The plan of construction of any living being is not only limited to its anatomy but it also determines its interactions with the surrounding world. Every subject has its own world of phenomena spread around it (*Erscheinungswelt*), because the objects of this world are made of impressions or sensations (*Empfindungen*) and qualities (*Qualitäten*) [Uexküll 1920: 96] of this subject and are objects only for it. In the world of worms there are only “wormy” objects, the world of dragonflies consists of object that are

⁴ Uexküll makes the distinction between the “plan of construction” (*Bauplan*), which decides about the spatial organization of living creatures and the “plan of skills” (*Leistungsplan, Funktionsplan lub Bildungsregel*), which determines the temporal rules of these processes [Uexküll 1921: 10]. Since the plan of skills is always subordinates to the plan of construction, for the sake of clarity I'm always referring to the latter.

“dragonfly-like” [Uexküll 1921: 45], whereas in the human world we find only human objects. The world of phenomena can be accessed only from within, that is to say, from within the given subjectivity, but is inaccessible to subjects outside. This predicament also applies to us, humans, who are destined to be stuck in our world of human phenomena [1920: 110]. Uexküll resorts to the metaphor of reality as **consisting of “soap bubbles” inaccessible from without** the world of specific subjects [Uexküll 1922: 180]. It follows then that every subject, every living being, not just humans, is shrouded in mystery.

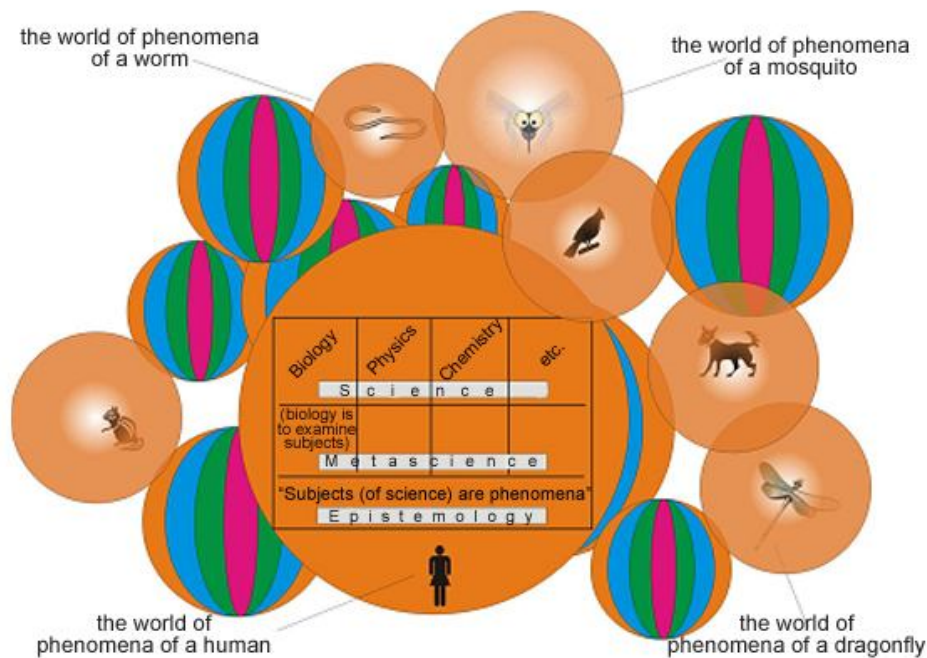


Figure 5. The vision of reality in the metaphor of J. v. Uexküll: the whole of reality is a collection of “soap bubbles” which cannot be apprehended from without

Jakob von Uexküll breaks with the modern, Cartesian framework of assumptions about nature. **Granting subjectivity to all living beings, he conceives of a “community of subjects”** comprising humans and the entire animate world. Such a community has axiological foundations, as the positive attribute of subjectivity is given to all living beings. That may serve as the basis for a new pro-ecological

value hierarchy and may help identify new ecological objectives for human action.

A good theory in and of itself will not suffice to make people change their attitudes and habits of thought. It is necessary to instil entirely new convictions and values in entire societies, so that these values would eventually come to seem obvious. Such reevaluation is rare among adults but quite feasible in case of children and youth. If the young are brought up according to the ecological value system, they are going to take it for granted. Hence the great task of **education** is to assist philosophy in the advocacy of environmental protection and biodiversity conservation. It should promote a new vision of the world formulated by philosophy. We could paraphrase the adage of a Polish thinker Jan Zamoyski and say after him: "the world will be such as the upbringing of its youth." In other words, the comprehensive protection of nature can only be promoted through **the nexus of (eco)philosophy and education. And that's what we're doing here.**

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ABSTRACT

PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE AND CULTURE AND ITS ROLE IN SHAPING HUMANKIND'S ATTITUDE TO NATURE

We live in an era of crises. One of them, the ecological crisis, arose from the fact that the human race plunders nature, destroying, among other things, the Earth's biodiversity. In my paper I will show that the situation is rooted in a specific worldview. Moreover, I will interrogate the question of how we can deal with the problem.

Humankind's attitude to themselves and to the world (including nature) is based on beliefs and values which make up an unquestioned prejudgment. Individuals absorb it in the process of socialization, as they assimilate the widely understood traditions of the social groups to which they belong. In the Western tradition in particular, our understanding of humanity's situation in the world and its relation to nature, which we have had since modernity, found its clearest articulation in the views of René Descartes (1596–1650). I will begin by discussing the main characteristics of this position most pertinent to the main problem identified in the title.

Then I will discuss the consequences of Cartesianism for the worldview of modern man such as the radical rationalism and anthropocentrism inherent in the European attitude. In this tradition humanity is identified with subjectivity and intellectual cognition. Reality outside of human subjectivity, that is, the whole animate and inanimate nature, is treated as the object of knowledge. Nature should be explored in the spirit of modernity's maxim "We can do as much as we know" (F. Bacon 1561-1626); it can be used to our purposes, to satisfy our growing needs. This is being done without scruple, precisely because nature is denied being the subject. It has no right to claim moral protection.

Today, in the era of globalization, this way of thinking, which originated in the West, has spread over the entire globe and led to the ongoing devastation of nature. We are dealing with an ecological disaster.

In the next step I will interrogate how this situation can be changed and what may be the role of philosophy in this cultural shift. Every vision of the world is a construct (the Cartesian vision being a very good example). What philosophy can do is offer a certain vision of reality, in which humanity has a friendly (symbiotic) attitude to nature and does not treat it merely as a means to their ends. Such ecophilosophy could

be based on the thesis that subjectivity is the property not just of all human beings, but of all other beings as well. Such an idea can be found in the work of the German scientist and philosopher Jacob von Uexküll (1864-1944), who granted the status of the subject to every living being. He laid foundations to the concept of nature as “a community of subjects” comprising man and the entire animate world, thus breaking away from the Cartesian framework. I am going to outline briefly his position.

Finally, I will point out what needs to be done, if people are to change their attitude to nature. A good theory in and of itself will not suffice. It is necessary to instill ecological convictions and values in entire societies, so that these values would eventually come to seem obvious. We need to launch an extensive education campaign of both adults and—perhaps even more importantly—children. In other words, the comprehensive protection of nature can only be promoted through the nexus of ecophilosophy and education.