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## **Humility in a Climate Age**

**by Paul Wapner**

Take your well-disciplined strengths  
and stretch them between two opposing poles.

Because inside human beings

is where God learns.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

There is a battle going on for the soul of environmentalism. How it plays out will determine our ability to respond to a whole host of environmental dilemmas, especially climate change. All of us are partners in this struggle, since battle lines are being drawn not simply on the street or in policy debates but also inside each of us. We are torn between two visions of how to relate to the earth. Much depends on how we negotiate our way through the conflict.

One vision sees *Homo sapiens* as merely one of many species, and thus subject to the same biophysical constraints as other creatures: Like the rest of life, we evolved over millennia, and depend fundamentally on the biophysical gifts of the earth. From an environmental perspective, this means that we should try to harmonize ourselves with the natural world—we

should use only so many resources and produce only so much waste, and generally strive to fit ourselves into the web of ecological interdependence.

The other vision sees humans as the exceptional species: Yes, we are subject to nature's laws, but these are not inviolate. We can outsmart, work around, or otherwise rise above them by employing our reason and technological abilities. From an environmental perspective, our exceptionalism calls on us not to harmonize ourselves with nature but to rework the natural world in the service of human betterment.

The first view can be called the urge toward *naturalism* whereas the second can be called the urge toward *mastery*.

For decades, environmentalists have primarily expressed the first view in their political orientation and campaigns. They have tended to confront their critics along the naturalism-mastery divide, offering a counter-narrative to the predominant, hubristic attitude of lording over nature and trying to instill a sense of species-humility in the face of growing environmental challenges.

Environmentalism is changing, however, especially in light of the climate crisis. Many are now toning down or outright abandoning a naturalist sensibility for one leaning toward mastery. We see this in the attraction to technological fixes as evident in the resurgence of support for nuclear power, the popularity of carbon sequestration, and the embrace of "green" consumption. Today, some staunch environmentalists are even proposing earth-altering actions to protect ourselves from the dangerous buildup of greenhouse gases, seeking to change the atmosphere itself to accept more carbon dioxide or at least deflect climate change dangers. Proposals include putting up orbiting sunshades to block sunlight, fertilizing the oceans with iron to grow more phytoplankton to absorb carbon dioxide, and pumping sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere to impede solar radiation. Many environmentalists have come reluctantly to recognize that there is simply no way that societies are going to cut back, restrict their imprint on the earth, and otherwise live lightly on the planet enough to mitigate climate change. Too many people need energy and are unwilling to deny themselves the pleasures of material consumption for an orientation of naturalism to take hold widely enough to make a difference. At this stage, they reason, we should ramp up our abilities to outsmart and manipulate nature in the service of protecting ourselves from climate catastrophe. Put differently, many environmentalists are now admitting that global capitalism, incessant technological innovation, endless consumption, and pervasive anthropocentrism are here to stay. Rather than continue to battle against these dynamics in the service of living more harmoniously with the natural world, many argue that it is time to embrace them and align ourselves with their power.

There is much promise to the "new environmentalism." In the shadow of Copenhagen's failed negotiations, we are all grasping at straws for insight, and the notion that technological fixes could enable us to surmount climate change dangers within the existing world order (and with our lifestyles intact) appears particularly attractive, especially to the privileged among us.

And yet, for all its promise, the new environmentalism raises significant questions. Is it really forward-looking, or will it simply reinforce and accelerate the forces that got us into the climate crisis in the first place? That is, can it usher in a new energy future or will its promise of technical solutions distract us from the difficult work of realigning our lives? Is it so compatible with current economic and social systems that it will merely diversify our energy choices without fashioning a genuinely different orientation to our energy lives? More

generally, we need to ask where the new environmentalism will lead us. Will it take us into a technocratic future animated by the type of design and technological optimism associated with Promethean thought that has long animated environmental skeptics, or will it prefigure a more naturalized world, more in line with the precautionary sensibility that has long guided the environmental movement?

There are no easy—and certainly no definitive—answers to such questions. We cannot evaluate the new environmentalism in either/or terms, as if it were *either* helpful *or* not in ushering in a sane climate future. Rather, the effects of the new environmentalism turn on how we translate it into practice. Key to such translation is recognizing that the impulse behind the new environmentalism needs to be in productive tension with conventional environmentalism and the urge to naturalism. As we move deeper into the climate age, we need to revive and embolden the impulse toward naturalism to rein in our hubristic tendencies. Our humanity depends on it.



*Traditional environmentalism taught us to live humbly within nature's limits. A new environmentalism, which assumes we can't learn fast enough to live humbly, embraces geo-engineering ideas as our main hope for cooling the planet. Graphic by DAVID BYGOTT*

## The Moral Character of the Two Environmentalisms

Environmentalism is many things. At its core, however, it is an ethical movement. As political theorist Leslie Thiele reminds us, it is about extending moral consideration across space, time, and species. It involves caring about the needs and well-being of our fellow human beings, future generations, and the more-than-human world. Addressing climate change is a moral act to the degree that it involves protecting each other and other creatures from climate catastrophe, and ensuring that future human beings will inherit a livable planet. In many ways, the new environmentalism does represent this moral sentiment. Its embrace of technological

capability, economic growth, and instrumental rationality represents a commitment to addressing the climate crisis and thus making the world a better place for all living creatures, including future generations.

There is, nonetheless, something unsettling about the moral character of the new environmentalism, especially to the degree that it ignores naturalism. Its promise to deliver a world in which we may continue to indulge all our appetites, desires, and customary practices simply by altering material structures seems morally thin. Such a vision involves technologically engineering the world so individual, environmental decision-making becomes irrelevant. It strives to ensure that we conduct ourselves in an environmentally sound fashion through designed systems of social life. This raises ethical concerns to the degree that it relieves individuals of having to clarify their moral commitments or take deliberate actions to limit themselves in the service of others' well-being.

Ethical action involves deliberation and the conscious choice to restrict acting on one's desires in deference to the welfare of others. The new environmentalism promises gadgets and systems that will absolve us of the need for such reflection and consideration. Most ethical action also entails a sense of humility about oneself and, by extension, the human species. At least since Aristotle, ethicists have considered humility a virtue whose practice deepens the human character and heightens one's moral sensitivity. The new environmentalism dispenses with this to the degree that it calls on us not to respect nature's limits and adjust ourselves to them, but to outsmart and plow through nature's biophysical character with the aim of crafting sustainable lives without requiring, or indeed permitting, the exercise of choice. Humility is thus a casualty of the new environmentalism.

This is not to say, of course, that the new environmentalism is immoral or even amoral. As mentioned, its proponents care deeply about protecting the environment and ensuring that humanity survives and flourishes in the face of grave environmental challenges. Rather, it is to suggest that the new environmentalism is *incompletely* moral. The new environmentalism needs the ethical bearings that sensitivity to naturalism can provide. It needs the sense of humility and the appreciation for the more-than-human world that conventional environmentalism has long valued and championed. This is especially the case at this point in history.

Since the dawn of modernity, the balance between naturalism and mastery has been increasingly weighted toward mastery. Our attempt to decipher nature's ways and manipulate them in the service of human betterment has been accelerating for centuries and shows few signs of abatement. Indeed, we seem continually committed to run roughshod over the nonhuman world. Given this imbalance, this is simply not the time for fully embracing the new environmentalism but rather reviving naturalism, which at its core expresses diffidence concerning human frailty, and the human condition more generally. Naturalism conveys the understanding that we—as individuals and as a species—are not at the center of the universe but simply occupy a distinct place in the order of things.

In many ways, it has been our self-centeredness—our placing ourselves at the core of existence and our willingness to do whatever it takes to advance our interests—that has been the cause of our environmental dilemmas. It is time to regenerate a cautionary attitude toward this sensibility and put it in its proper place. If checked by humility, the new environmentalism can offer wonders without veering off in dangerous and ethically troubling directions. Couched within an effort to balance naturalism and mastery, the new environmentalism can take its rightful place in the evolution of the movement. It can offer

promise toward addressing climate change by urging us to explore our technological, scientific, and "economistic" tendencies and capabilities. It will fail us, however, if we don't balance these proclivities and capacities with the moral compass of knowing that, while we may be unique as a species, we are not exempt from nature's laws and imperatives, and we live less than full lives when we forget this. This recognition, paired with the realization that there is more to the cosmos than humans, provides the antidote to the hubris of the mastery narrative—and to our collective ability to address climate change.

The tension between naturalism and mastery is as important to environmentalism as the paradoxes that wrack human life are to human experience. We live best when we refuse to collapse such paradoxes. Likewise, we will live most humanely through the climate age by keeping alive the long environmentalist tradition of harmonizing with the natural world rather than lording over it.

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