
**Finding Data:
Some Reflections on Ontologies and Normativities**

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Abstract

The very name of the new International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture is a programmatic challenge. It brings together three concepts that are notoriously difficult to grasp. Instead of providing ultimate definitions for these concepts, this article argues that the object of scrutiny in academic research is not nature as such, but the cultural processes that produce certain ideas about nature *as nature*. Thus, ontological statements are our *data*; they are not part of our *argument*. The article argues for a contextualization and historicization of concepts of nature and exemplifies this with reference to a selection of topics that lend themselves to critical analysis. Ontologies and normativities, implicitly or explicitly, are powerful elements of any nature discourse. They constitute conflicting mindsets that determine the way people respond to their environment. In academic analysis, these mindsets are helpful tools for structuring historical processes and discursive formations, the latter including human action and societal realities. Mindsets are not only ways of thinking; they are inextricably bound to the 'appropriation of nature' that scholarly analysis has to decode and contextualize. Two culturally influential concepts of nature are used as an example of these processes.

Religion, Nature and Culture

The very name of the new International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture is a programmatic challenge. It brings together three concepts that are notoriously difficult to grasp. In the case of 'religion' one can say that we will never arrive at a commonly accepted definition; because the constructive element is an inherent part of any definition, any categorization of religion has to reflect on its underlying bias. 'Culture', then, is just as difficult to conceptualize. Often, the idea of culture

encompasses everything that is a product of human activity and this idea is often juxtaposed to 'nature', which is understood as everything outside of 'culture' or human activity.¹ Hence, an ultimately polemical dichotomy lies at the bottom of this Society's name. How do we respond to that? And how do we methodologically cope with the challenging difficulties of these terms? The following reflections are an attempt to sort out a few arguments that repeatedly have haunted scholars who engage the relation between religion, nature and culture. Rather than providing ultimate answers to these nagging problems, I briefly want to identify what I regard as basic methodological issues in the field. I will argue for a contextualization and historicization of concepts of nature and will exemplify this with reference to a selection of topics that lend themselves to critical analysis.

In his introduction to the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Bron Taylor offers us a pragmatic definition of 'nature': 'Nature is that world which includes—but at the same time is perceived to be largely beyond—our human bodies, and which confronts us daily with its apparent otherness' (Taylor 2005: x). One might ask: if nature is the world, what, then, is *not* nature? How can we be confronted with 'otherness', if everything 'largely beyond' us is nature? Underlying this approach is an important insight into the inevitably anthropocentric character of human concepts of nature. Analytically, we simply *have* to assume a break between human realms ('culture') and what is referred to as nature. Totalizing or 'physiocentric'² ideas of nature that include all of humanity are problematic (for instance, nuclear catastrophes must then be interpreted as natural catastrophes). References to nature as the ultimate normative instance lead to self-contradictory ethical positions. This is the argument of the so-called 'naturalistic fallacy', introduced in 1903 by G.E. Moore: The logical relation between description and evaluation can never be so tight that the latter can be derived from the former.

The derivation of moral and other normative or evaluative statements is dependent on at least one additional assumption that itself is normative or evaluative. In other words: For the justification of an evaluation I can never refer to (real or putative) facts of nature alone. Nature can never be the only 'foundation and norm of ethical behavior'. Every attempt to escape the task

1. See, among many others, Albanese 1990: 16-46; Oelschlaeger 1991. In North America especially, the idea of nature is closely related to a semantic association with *wilderness*, an issue I cannot engage here. On the Puritan basis of this connection see Brunotte 2000; on the relation between wilderness and the 'savage' in North American identity formation, see Deloria 1998.

2. On this term, see Groh and Groh 1996: 87.

(and responsibility) of one's own evaluation and decision with reference to an objectively given nature is doomed to fail (Birnbacher 1997: 225).

In a similar vein, Ruth and Dieter Groh persuasively argue that we can avoid these conclusions only if we accept the two-fold nature of human-kind—human beings are at the same time part of nature and products of culture, capable of rational argumentation. It is the latter aspect that makes ethics possible and gives human beings the responsibility to reflect on their behavior. 'The epistemic anthropocentrism is absolutely unavoidable, and even physiocentrism can not escape it' (Groh and Groh 1996: 86).³

And how does this concept of nature relate to 'culture', which is also 'largely beyond' us? I am convinced that we will escape these irritating questions only if we avoid any essentialization of nature. *Nature is a concept and not a thing*. Put philosophically: the ontological status of nature is *not inherent* in nature itself; its ontological status is attributed by human beings. Consequently, it is not nature that confronts us with otherness, even if that is our perception. Otherness can be perceived only on the basis of distinctions that are *not inherent* in nature; instead, they are the result of cultural negotiation or discourse. We can even conclude: 'nature' is the *product* of human culture. Adding the term 'culture' to the Society's name was therefore a very good decision.

Ontologies and Normativities as Data of Scholarly Analysis

This has far-reaching implications with regard to the objects of scholarly research. If nature *as nature* is produced by cultural processes, our object of study is not nature but these very processes. Therefore, we do not need a definition of nature. We adopt a meta-position and look at the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, demarcation and definition. Rather than asking, 'What is nature?', it is more interesting to ask, 'Why do people conceptualize nature in this way?', or 'What are the implications of particular concepts of nature?', or 'How can we historicize and contextualize ontological statements regarding nature?'

Thus, ontological statements are our *data*; they are not part of our *argument*. When people say that the earth is a living being they express their emotional involvement with nature in an ontological way. Joan Halifax does so in her *The Fruitful Darkness*, a book full of wisdom and

3. It is important to note that the epistemic anthropocentrism does not correspond to an egoistic anthropocentrism. Quite the contrary: only by acknowledging the epistemic break between nature and the human being are we able to *argue* for environmental responsibility; see Groh and Groh 1996. See also Birnbacher 1997: 225-26.

astounding mysticism. Repeatedly she appeals to ontological dimensions of nature that escape rational observation.

The world around us, culture and the wilderness,⁴ make indelible impressions on our minds. A timeless conversation is going on among all things, yet we seem to have selected out our next of kin as the only ones we actually listen to (Halifax 1994: 93).

Halifax is fully aware of the fact that if we listen to entities and species other than human, we will leave the confines of academic discourse: 'This wisdom cannot be told, but it is to be found by each of us in the direct experience of silence, stillness, solitude, simplicity, ceremony, and vision' (Halifax 1994: 148).⁵ We are confronted here with the gap between personal experiences that are capable of deeply moving human beings, and the demands of academic discussion that has to insist on inter-subjectivity, falsifiable argument, theorizing and communication in rational language. Noting this gap does not disqualify experience or ontological statements as 'wrong';⁶ it simply insists that scholarship and argument is something else. Of course, we will have to state the same with regard to *negative* ontologies, for instance the idea that nature is there for us to use and exploit, because nature is devoid of any spiritual or divine elements. Again, scholarship and argument is something else.

If we consider ontological statements about nature our objects of study, we will also have to look at the people who make these claims. In most cases, these people are religious specialists or theologians who argue from a particular ontological point of view that attributes nature a certain status. Very often, however, these people are scholars of religion or academics who mix up their personal involvement with scholarly argumentation.⁷ Let me exemplify this with two influential books. In his *The Idea of Wilderness*, Max Oelschlaeger presents himself as a critical observer of the postmodern discourse that challenges all claims of absolute certainty. 'Truth is not out there', he notes, 'in a world independent of a community of scientific researchers, but is enabled by the linguistically articulated assumptions and human practices (including scientific instrumentation) that enable inquiry' (Oelschlaeger 1991: 325). While

4. Note the implicit epistemological anthropomorphism that informs even this metaphysical language.

5. On p. 32, she concludes: 'I had realized that I had no choice but to enter the world of tribal peoples as friend and student rather than researcher and scholar'.

6. This could only be done on the basis of a competing ontology, for instance from a theological point of view.

7. Many of these scholars are academic specialists who, like Halifax, turn into religious specialists, a phenomenon that is particularly important for the emergence of modern western shamanism; see von Stuckrad 2003b: 137-59.

Oelschlaeger subscribes to this self-critical reflection of modern science and philosophy—referring to Kuhn (1996), Feyerabend (1988), and Rorty (1980)—he nevertheless feels comfortable with strong ontological statements such as the following: ‘We now stand in position to reawaken a primordial consciousness of the Great Mother who sustains us all’ (Oelschlaeger 1991: 336). Not being able to clarify concepts such as ‘primordial consciousness’ or ‘Great Mother’, with this statement the author has left the confines of critical philosophical debate and entered the large field of theological truth-claims. Or did he just mix up the position of reflective relativism—every claim is *related* in context—with arbitrariness, i.e. the wrong conclusion that one claim is as good as the other?

Another case in point is Roger S. Gottlieb’s introduction to the volume *This Sacred Earth*. As this anthology’s title promises, we find a cornucopia of ontologically laden expressions such as ‘our love of God’s creation’ or ‘our simple joy in the divinity of the earth’ (Gottlieb 1996: 13). ‘Making nature sacred’ thus is a strategy that underlies not only products of literature—as analyzed by John Gatta (2004), from whom I borrowed this expression—but products of academic literature, too.⁸ From a critical scholarly point of view, these affirmations and admonitions are not an argument. They are data.

As we have to address hidden ontologies, we also have to scrutinize normativities that underlie religious and scholarly narratives. Many scholarly publications are dominated by the normative assumption that an environmentally minded, respectful, and positive religion is better than a religion that encourages exploitative and environmentally negative human behavior. Although there may be good reasons for advocating the environmentally positive currents in religious traditions, if we want the human species to survive,⁹ this hidden agenda often leads to an ultimately colonializing attempt of ‘improving’ religions that are deemed ecologically inferior. That is why we have to put these normativities on the table and regard them as data of scholarly research.

8. That it is highly productive to study scholarly works as *literature* is famously demonstrated by White 1987.

9. Note that this presupposition is anthropocentric. As I argued above, we can not logically derive an ethical norm of behavior from ontological descriptions. Necessarily, other normative assumptions enter into our line of argument, in this case the idea that it is desirable to have human beings on earth. From an argumentative point of view, we could just as well suppose that human beings should disappear from the earth as soon as possible—a presupposition held by some biocentric thinkers and apocalyptically inclined environmentalists—which leads to completely different recommendations of human behavior. On some of these conclusions by representatives of Earth First! see Taylor 1995: 117, 136.

Conflicting Mindsets in Historical Perspective

Ontologies and normativities, implicitly or explicitly, are powerful elements of any nature discourse. They constitute conflicting mindsets that determine the way people respond to their environment. In academic analysis, these mindsets are helpful tools for structuring historical processes and discursive formations (in the Foucauldian sense), the latter including human action and societal realities. Mindsets are not only ways of thinking; they are inextricably bound to the 'appropriation of nature' (*Naturaneignung* in the Grohs' apt term; see Groh and Groh 1991) that scholarly analysis has to decode and contextualize. Let me explain this with two examples, taken from European cultural history.

Ruth and Dieter Groh have argued that two very different 'cultural patterns' or 'symbolic fields' have influenced western attitudes toward nature from antiquity through modernity (see Groh and Groh 1996: 96-114; Groh 2003: 15-20). One cultural pattern conceptualizes nature as a perfect harmonious economy—*oeconomia naturae*. This idea fostered teleological and universalistic ideologies of progress and positive value that legitimated liberal forms of power in western history. The other concept regards nature as 'fallen'—*natura lapsa*—thus leading to anti-teleology, anti-universalism, and the legitimization of authoritarian forms of power. Both mindsets are theologically-based and metaphysically-informed concepts of nature, harkening back to different interpretations of the biblical narrative. These mindsets correlate with social realities and assumptions about the status of the human being in philosophical anthropology. Used as ideal types, the distinction of two conflicting attitudes toward nature helps us to better understand the ambivalent processes of nature discourse in western history.

Another helpful differentiation stems from philosophy of nature. Since antiquity, a distinction has been made between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. While the latter refers to the *product* of nature, often regarded as dead results of creative processes and linked to the material aspects of revelation, *natura naturans* addresses the creative power inherent in nature, the 'naturing' of nature.¹⁰ Both distinctions are replete with normative and ontological assumptions and conclusions. Engaging the very processes of creation has been regarded as a breach of taboo, because this puts the human being in a position that has to be reserved

10. The concept of *natura naturans* goes back to Aristotle but was explicated in Scholasticism and peripatetic philosophy. Averroes, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas and Roger Bacon refer to it, but it is only through Schelling that the term entered modern *Naturphilosophie*. On the latter, see von Stuckrad 2002: 784-86.

for God.¹¹ Limiting science to the revealed world, to the simple material results of God's creation, fostered the emergence of empirical science that emancipated humans from religious authority, but at the same time made it impossible to speak scientifically about the divine. Again, we have two ideal type attitudes toward nature that help structure human thinking and action in western cultural history.

As a conclusion, one of my recommendations for a prosperous future of research into religion, nature and culture is the historicization and contextualization of ontologies and normativities—including our own.¹² Rather than defining 'nature', we should look at the cultural processes that bring forth conceptual patterns regarding nature; if we historicize these mindsets with the help of influential ideal types, we will better understand—and relativize—the modern *conditio humana et naturae*.

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11. A brilliant analysis of how such a mindset shaped alchemical practice is Newman 2004.

12. On the 'recursive application of critique of ideology' see von Stuckrad 2003a: 264.

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