

# BEING ONE WITH THE PLANET: Experiencing the 'Sacred' in a 'Secular' Mind

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**Abstract:** The paper traces the current unprecedented climate crisis to human alienation from nature and argues that human/nature dichotomy is concomitant with the sharp psychological boundary between the self and the world. The ways of looking at nature and the world are a function of our attention, implying that it is possible to regain the lost connection with the planet by rewiring the ways of attention. At least some mystic experiences can be understood in terms of different ways of attention, and this suggests that it is possible to experience unity with all that exists even without entertaining any supernatural beliefs.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Corpuscularism, Gaia Hypothesis, Iain McGilchrist, Mysticism.

## 1. Introduction

Humanity is at crossroads. On the one hand, development is no longer seen as an option but a necessity. On the other hand, it is no longer easy to turn a blind eye to the catastrophic impact of developmental activity. Caught between the devil and the deep sea, human beings search frantically for solutions such as sustainable development, hoping that it is possible to have the best of both worlds. Be that as it may, in this kind of scenario, it is imperative to ask the question, how did we end up reaching this stage, deserving even the title 'deranged species'?

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The paper explores this question and suggests a way out of this human condition. The first section discusses the nature of the human/nature dichotomy resulting in the modern colonialist attitude of conquering nature. The second section deals with the nature of attention and argues, following Iain McGilchrist, that the dominance of a particular kind of attention underlies the human/nature dichotomy and the sharp psychological boundary between the self and the world. The last section discusses the Gaia hypothesis and argues that some accounts of mystic experience point at realising Gaia, and this, in turn, involves significant changes in the mode of attention.

## **2. Human/Nature Dichotomy**

The unprecedented climate crisis facing humanity leads us to ask a question that is not given due attention: Why did we end up having to conserve nature? Even if there was no solid knowledge, at the beginning of Industrialisation, about the impact of burning fossil fuels, the attitude of conquering nature was indeed the impetus of the whole project of terraforming the planet. Even if some form of dualist thinking was present throughout human history, treating nature as fully mechanical (without any mentation) and humans as uniquely capable of having mental states became the standard view during the last couple of centuries.

Two major developments underlie this picture of humans and nature (Martin and Barresi 123-26). One is corpuscularism, according to which matter is composed of minute particles. This resulted in doing away with any talk of ends or purpose as far as nature is concerned. This was a significant change from the Aristotelian scheme according to which forms and purpose were integral to the universe as a whole. Once nature is seen as fully mechanical, i.e. without any purpose, it follows that humans are unique in being endowed with mental qualities. Descartes' claim that only humans are conscious and the foundation of all knowledge lies in human thinking, which cannot be doubted at all, was the second major factor that resulted in giving rise to an unbridgeable gulf between humans and nature. First, nature was

seen as fully mechanical in the sense of being devoid of any mentality and then humans were seen as unique possessors of mental capacity, which in turn enables them to have access to knowledge of nature. In the words of Martin and Baressi, "the physical world lost its spirituality and became a machine, and the subjective world lost its physicality" (126).

This suggests that the idea of an objective world, which assumes a sharp separation between the subject and object, is gradually developed among human beings. Ancient humans must have considered themselves to have a close connection with nature. Even when urbanisation happened, as Frankfurt et al. observe, the feeling of essential connection with nature remained intact (364). That means there was little scope to conceptualise humans as essentially distinct from nature. The basic experience of being embedded in the world remained intact. This means that the conception of nature as something bereft of humans is something invented (Lloyd 418). According to Lloyd, in certain Greek conceptions of nature, nature was even seen as permeated with values (432). That means the kind of sharp distinction made between facts and values in our times was not the default view during those days. Nature was even seen as the source of values, and this view was far away from the modern conception of nature as something separate from human beings. It is this latter conception that makes humans able to look at nature as a cheap resource to be controlled or conquered.

The binary of nature/society has been central to the project of capitalism (Moore 2). Treating nature as a resource for the development of capitalism has been taken for granted in what is called the global consensus for development or 'developmentality' (Deb 2). It looks at nature as a cheap resource for the never-ending quest for progress. Francis Bacon even used the language of torturing nature to get its secrets revealed, and one of his books was even titled *The Masculine Birth of Time: The Great Instauration of the Dominion of Man over the Universe*. This provided ideological support to the project of terraforming the planet, which eventually resulted in what is even called the

death of nature (Merchant xxii). This often assumed violent forms towards indigenous people and their ways of life. Whether it be the Dutch conquest of places like Indonesia, the Portuguese conquest of parts of Africa, or the British conquest of India, all had a similar pattern of enhancing one's wealth by making use of native lands and usurping the native population of its lifestyles and world view. Modern colonialism started during what is called the Age of Discovery, had its agenda to find raw material for its nascent industries and market for its mass-produced objects. Extraction of natural resources was one of the major aims of colonialist expansion.

This resulted in brutal acts of violence toward the indigenous people. Massacre and genocide were the norms rather than exceptions in several cases of colonial conquest. Whether in Bandas islands or in the Pequot massacre, the underlying pattern was the same: ensuring that the indigenous do not stand in the way of the coloniser's unfettered access to natural resources. (Ghosh 42) Similarly, exploitation and neglect of the native population resulted in avoidable privation and starvation deaths as in the Bengal famine. Entire aboriginal groups were wiped out in many parts of the world, and this was often couched in terms of the mission of civilising the savaged and related sanctimonious attitudes.

Further, this was justified by the view that property should belong to those who could use it. The argument was that the native population did not know how to use the land, and therefore it was the right of the colonisers to conquer the land so that it could be used efficiently. If this resulted in the extermination of the natives, then that was collateral damage. The presumptuous reasoning went on like this: The settlers embody reason, and human dignity is the result of being able to use reason (as per the principles of the French Enlightenment). Then the natives, whose ways vary significantly, presumably do not use reason and therefore do not deserve dignity. As the American President Theodore Roosevelt stated, "The settler and pioneer have at bottom, had justice on their side; this great

continent could not have been kept as nothing but a game preserve for squalid savages" (53).

Thus, there was a fundamental conflict between the colonisers and the colonised. If the former looked at nature as something to be conquered and controlled, the latter considered nature as essentially continuous with themselves. In other words, for the natives, there was no nature bereft of humans. The belief in the pervasiveness of spirit existing all throughout nature may appear ghost-like for a modern sensibility, but the core of this attitude was the essential connection between all that exists or even the realisation that everything is ultimately made of similar stuff.

It was not the case that the attitude of unsettling natives and conquering nature did not have any detractors even during the peak of colonisation. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, one could see strong voices that countered the right of the Europeans to civilise the indigenous. For instance, Denis Diderot questioned the rights of European settlers to conquer other people's lands and called for respecting the rights of indigenous people. Similar views were held by thinkers like Immanuel Kant and Johann Herder. (Muthu 2). But such views did not become common during that period, and the colonialist expansion project went unhindered until the twentieth century.

Apart from the failure to uphold different modes of life, the colonialist project was based on the drive for unlimited expansion catalysed by greed. Further, this greed for more and more was even justified in terms of the stadial theory of history. As per Scottish Enlightenment (Irving 94), all societies could be understood by the same criteria of progress. That means, if hunter-gathering was the primitive mode of life, then progress to, say, pastoral, agricultural and industrial are necessary stages in the development of human societies. Adam Ferguson argues in the book *Essays in the History of Civil Society* that this change involved having more and more useful knowledge (95). That means not all societies could cultivate relevant knowledge, resulting in different development stages. In other words, the latest stage in the development of a society is one wherein they

have a maximum production of useful knowledge. This necessity was even understood in ontogenetic development, in which one single cell in the womb necessarily becomes a full-fledged organism.

From this perspective, living in tune with nature was a primitive way of life, and modern life is a matter of being away from nature and even looking at nature as something to be controlled. The war between two world views, one which looks at nature with reverence realising the essential connection among all that exists, including humans, and the other looking at nature as inert and to be controlled and conquered, decidedly ended with a temporary success for the latter. As Joyce Chaplin puts it, eliminating the view that matter is spiritual played a major role in the European conquest of the Americas (15). It was perceived as eliminating improper views of nature and keeping nature in its due position.

Even if direct colonialism has almost come to an end, the attitude of terraforming the planet and looking at it as a resource to ensure human progress remains the bedrock of much of policy making. The mentality that undergirds colonialism that the planetary resources need to be used for the human benefit, which, in turn, is understood in terms of the linear notion of progress, has become almost universally accepted. The utter failure to appreciate the simple fact that humans and the rest of nature are inextricably intertwined has resulted in a crisis of infinite magnitude. The mechanistic worldview, which attempts to break down nature into its parts, did not leave much scope to appreciate the organic interdependence of all that exists. This sanctioned the exploitation of nature, which, coupled with the unbridled greed, resulted in empires of conflicts and devastation. Of course, the need for conservation is accepted, and policy-making considers the necessity to conserve. For instance, talk of 'sustainable development' has gained momentum though it may remain an oxymoron. The tendency is still to prefer non-sustainable development to non-development. In other words, the habit of looking at development as something essential has not changed much. That is to say, there

is hardly any paradigm shift in human attitude to nature or human understanding of their own existence in categories other than progress.

Why is it the case that it is easy for humans to consider themselves separate from nature and look at it as a cheap resource for our quest for unlimited growth and progress? Though Wilson famously argued that humans are endowed with biophilia, a genetic propensity to affiliate with nature (Wilson 1), in our times, it rarely translates into any visceral connection with nature. Here it is important to look into our ability of attention and how it creates the reality for us.

### **3. Attention and Reality**

William James wrote, "what we attend to is the reality" (949). This is certainly not a claim about the ultimate nature of reality but about the sense of reality we have in the course of paying attention. The sense of reality we have at a time  $t$  is a function of the things that we pay attention to. At time  $t_1$  it can change because we may pay attention to different things.

There are different types of attention, such as involuntary, voluntary, focused, and diffused. Involuntary attention is one when a stimulus grabs our attention; voluntary attention takes place when we intentionally pay attention to something; and focussed or narrow attention is when the attentional resource concentrates on one thing. For instance, when reading a book, there is focused attention at work. Open or diffused attention is a matter of being receptive to whatever enters the attentional domain. Similarly, a distinction can be made between verbal and non-verbal attention. Verbal attention is one where language plays a major role in the attentional process. Non-verbal attention, on the other hand, takes place without being mediated by language.

Iain McGilchrist argues that in our times, there is excessive dominance of narrow, verbal attention at the expense of open, non-verbal attention (209-237). The latter has to be the master, but things have come the other way around. He calls them left-hemispheric and right-hemispheric modes of attention,

respectively, citing evidence that the left and right hemispheres have different ways of attending to things. The former is sequential, verbal, (in the case of human beings) narrow, disengaged and instrumentalistic. The latter is holistic, non-verbal, broad, engaged, open, and not tied to any instrumental value.

According to McGilchrist, when we attend to things in a left-hemispheric way, i.e., with a narrow focus and oriented to a target, we create a world in which everything is understood in terms of utility. The right hemisphere attends to things in a different way. It does not focus on any particular thing but is open to all that is around. Further, it is engaged and connected with all that is around. In fact, to be open means not to exclude things, which underlies connection or direct engagement (not mediated through language).

Our primary mode of engagement with the world is direct and broad; we have to use narrow, verbal attention for certain tasks. This is what is meant by saying that the right-hemispheric mode has to be the master while the other remains an emissary. Direct attention, for instance, is a matter of looking at or touching an object, say, a tree, without thinking in terms of the word 'tree'. This amounts to being engaged or connected with the world without being mediated through language. In the words of McGilchrist, presentation comes before representation (191). To appreciate what we are presented with before representing it in language, we need to make use of open, receptive attention. He even says, "right hemisphere is more empathetic: its stance toward others is less competitive and more attuned to compassion and fellow feeling" (*Ways of Attending* 20). He points out that these are different ways of being in the world and not different ways of thinking about the world.

McGilchrist points out that left-hemispheric attention has become dominant with profound consequences in our times. Either/or approach to reality is the result of the dominance of left-hemispheric attention. The sharp distinction between the subject and the object is an example of this. This hides experiential reality in its givenness where movement is primary,



and subject and object are two aspects of it. As Mark Johnson puts it, "Subjects and objects (persons and things) are abstractions from the interactive process of our experience of a meaningful self-in-a-world" (20). But this interactive process is occluded when the left-hemispheric way is dominant and subject and object become sharp ways of distinguishing the world.

When subject and object are sharply distinguished, there is hardly any room for appreciating the whole of which the subject and objects are different aspects. In fact, categorical thinking has the drawback of missing the whole picture. Though we certainly need to think in terms of categories, this need not be at the expense of the whole picture. But when narrow attention is dominant and open attention is not given its due, a sharp boundary between the subject and object becomes the experiential reality. The human/nature dichotomy could be understood along these lines. That means, the sharp distinction between humans and nature can be understood in terms of the dominance of narrow verbal attention.

Looking at nature in terms of its utility is a matter of narrow attention, the dominance of which is in tune with the notion of progress in the physical world, both at the individual level and that of society. Progress is understood exclusively in human terms, with the role of nature limited to providing the resources for it. Further, individual progress is ensured if she works for societal progress. This circumscribes attention to certain things that are instrumental for one's purpose of progress, and the rest are rarely attended to. Needless to say, the way of looking at nature as something separate from us and to be conquered and controlled is possible only with the dominance of the left-hemispheric way of attention.

The way attention creates reality suggests this possibility: in, say, a hunter-gatherer environment, when attention is often diverted towards external things due to a lifestyle heavily dependent on what the environment provides, there is not much scope for thoughts to wander from past to present. In the modern way of life, for a significant amount of time, our attention gets grabbed by wandering thoughts (Gruberger et al.

8). When the mind wanders, perceptual decoupling occurs (Smallwood and Schooler 501). That means, our attention is not oriented towards what takes place in the present to which our perceptual system is always directed. This indicates that the sharp separation between the subject and the object is likely to be felt when perceptual decoupling occurs. So, when the default mode network of the brain is correlated with mind wandering, the default sense of self becomes one of separative or free-floating. This, in turn, amounts to the sharp separation between the subject and object and can make the human/nature dichotomy appear to be the normal way of things.

In fact, there have been claims to the effect that the kind of self-concept humans have, what is commonly called the ego, is of recent origin. Even if one does not have any clinching evidence for such claims, it is reasonable to hold that the sense of separation or alienation becomes stronger when dependence on nature comes down and humans start thinking that they are able to conquer nature due to some initial success in such efforts. In such a scenario, as one can see in our times, biophilia gets reduced to the appreciation of manicured lawns or carefully crafted gardens.

The notion of useful knowledge and the advancement of society need to be understood in this point. When attention is largely directed towards what is useful, knowledge also becomes restricted to useful knowledge. The fact that we are simply parts of the cosmos and there is no binary between humans and nature may not be useful knowledge. It is not just useless but dangerous knowledge as it can impact the very bedrock of the dominant mode of living where concern for progress and development far outweigh the requirement of planetary co-existence.

#### **4. Gaia Hypothesis and the Reality of a Mystic**

The hypothesis, formulated by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, claims that the whole of the earth, including physical and biological systems, behaves like a single entity (Lovelock 10). The interaction of the living systems and the surrounding

inorganic environment form a self-regulating system. In the words of Lovelock, the hypothesis is a 'looking glass for seeing the world differently.' It shows that the earth is a living system, and we are part of it. In fact, the interconnection of all living organisms is evident in Darwinian evolution. Towards the end of *Origin of Species*, Darwin writes "that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us" (403).

In the Gaia hypothesis, one can see a clear reversal of the position where the physical world lost its spirituality, and the subjective world lost its physicality. It indeed calls for a radical transformation in the way we look at our surroundings which, in turn, suggests a change in how we look at ourselves. It amounts to ending any adversarial relationship between humans and nature and accepting the inextricable interlinking of all that exists on the planet. This certainly requires making open attention more prominent.

Some mystical accounts point to a departure from ordinary experience where things are easily categorised in white or black terms. It often assumes the form of attenuating the psychological boundary between the self and the world and attending to the world with full intensity. This is aptly captured by the French philosopher-mystic Simone Weil as "giving up being the center of the world in imagination, to discern that all points in the world are equally centers and the true center is the outside world" (160). For her, attention consists of "suspending our thought" and refers to a particular kind of attention where one just pays attention to data about a problem in geometry without trying to find the solution. It is a matter of looking at something without looking for any result. She even says that the highest part of attention only makes contact with God.

Similar accounts of mystic experiences are available in many traditions, whether of the East or the West (Forman 45-110). Whether it be monotheistic religions such as Christianity or Islam or Indian traditions, mystic experiences can be found in different ways. It involves a change from the normal mental state

of separation, characterised by an undercurrent of unease, to an expanded sense of reality where one feels oneself viscerally connected with all that exists. The near-universality of such experiences points to the possibility of actualising them by means of developing open, diffused attention. If the dominance of narrow, verbal attention gives rise to the thickening of the psychological boundary, open, non-verbal attention can reduce that boundary. This can amount to experiencing the Gaia, and Simone Weil's description of changes in attention needs to be understood in this context.

In fact, mindfulness practice often stresses what is called choiceless awareness, in which one remains simply aware of what is happening without engaging in unnecessary conceptualisation. This certainly reduces the psychological boundary between the self and the world, with the sense of reality becoming enlarged to encompass all that exists. This is the result of "discerning that all points in the world are equally centers." This in no way diminishes the capacity of biological organisms to maintain themselves. Instead, it points to the dissolution of psychological boundaries and consequent realisation of the whole of which all that exists form parts. This is even referred to as cosmic consciousness—the awareness of the whole cosmos not as the subject looking at an object but in which both subject and object are different facets.

It is evident that such an experience does not presuppose any particular religious background but can be had even in what is ordinarily referred to as a 'secular' mind. That is to say, it does not involve any belief in numinous entities or acceptance of a particular religious belief. All that is essential is the proper flourishing of open, diffused attention and the realisation that the self is not a separate entity looking at the world. What is often referred to as the 'sacred' in spiritual literature is the experience of being an integral part of all that exists. This experience of the 'sacred' can be understood in terms of a revision in the way one understands oneself and a different order of experience as a result of it. In such an experience, the sense of reality is not centred around the mental sense of self as a

separate entity but encompasses the whole world with its myriad forms of existence.

When the self is not something that looks at the world for accumulation or aggrandisement, then the whole character of life can change. Subject and object are no longer sharply separated, but life as an essentially interactive process is experienced fully. The description "giving up being the center of the world in imagination" points to overcoming the sharp sense of separation that the subject has from the world. Just like there is the mental sense of self, there is a mental sense of the world. In other words, the 'world' remains just an idea, and it is sharply separated from the world. As long as the narrow verbal attention is dominant, our life may run largely within the framework of this mental world. But when open, diffused attention is given its due, the world is understood in its full grandeur, and one becomes aware that "the true center is the outside world," Then there is no longer any scope for the human/nature dichotomy to arise.

Just like nature is no longer something distant to be controlled or conquered, life is not something to be narrated in terms of success or failure. In other words, the self is not a separate entity from the world, looking at the world for its expansion or aggrandisement. Life can be as simple and effortless as what Alfred Wallace wrote:

I'd be an Indian here, and live content  
To fish, and hunt, and paddle my canoe,  
And see my children grow, like young wild fawns,  
In health of body and in peace of mind,  
Rich without wealth, and happy without gold !" (176–180)

## 5. Conclusion

There is a close relationship between the human/nature dichotomy and the sharp separation between the self and the world. Modern human life, centred around the notions like progress and development, assumes a sharp separation between humans and nature. Nature is seen as something to be conquered and controlled, and this has resulted in irreparable

damage to the ecosystem and rampant inequality with stupendous growth in technology.

A sharp psychological boundary between the self and the world is concomitant with the human/nature dichotomy. When it is assumed that humans have the mental capacity not found anywhere else in nature, the human/nature binary is the result. At the level of an individual, this can assume the form of alienation or estrangement of the self from the world.

There have been reports of experience of unity with all that exists in different traditions. They are often understood in religious or spiritual terms. But it is possible to understand such experience in terms of drastic changes in the way attention operates. The ordinary experience in terms of a clear difference between subject and object can be due to the dominance of the left-hemispheric way of attending to things which stresses categorical thinking and does not give importance to context and the whole that encompasses both subjects and objects. Further, the left-hemispheric way is called verbal, narrow, and focussed, whereas the right-hemispheric one is non-verbal, broad, and open. Both kinds of attention are essential for any organism, but the right hemispheric one is expected to be dominant because that is the source of direct connection with the world. But this dominance is no longer palpable in modern human beings, and it appears that the left-hemispheric way has become the default view. The wide acceptance of a worldview centred around human progress disregarding the rest of the planet can be attributed to the dominance of narrow, verbal attention at the expense of open, diffused attention. It is possible to overcome this dominance and establish a balance between the two modes of attention which, in turn, may result in a more harmonious mode of life. Practices such as mindfulness meditation emphasise non-verbal, open attention. The salutary impact of such practices has been established, and it is high time much more importance is given to them so as to help in the urgent task of healing the planet.

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