

## SECULARISATION, MAN AND THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

S. G. Nigal\*

*Abstract: For centuries, man has been trying to understand himself and the universe in which he lives and by which he is sustained. While striving for food and shelter, dependent on the Nature surrounding him, the human race has constantly been engaged in a struggle for existence and has been forced to adjust to the inherent natural laws of Nature. But man, being rational and inquisitive, has been making attempts to understand this system of natural governance in order to control it. To put it more candidly, man has been trying to conquer Nature. It is this exploitative attitude towards the environment that is directly and indirectly creating ecological disasters. If man has the capacity to make changes in Nature, which he has amply demonstrated through scientific and technical progress, then he must accept liability for his varied acts and their harmful consequences to the environment. In this way, man has a responsibility towards Nature. Man has completely forgotten the factual truth that Nature is indispensable, he himself is in Nature, and that he cannot exist without Nature. Thus, one can argue that the way out lies not only in preventative measures but also corrective measures, focusing on developing a reverential outlook towards Nature. This paper is mainly concerned with modern Western thought, its secularization of man which subsequently has had detrimental impacts on the environment, and how only a divine reverential outlook towards Nature can stop the ecological crisis we face.*

FOR CENTURIES, man has been trying to understand himself and the universe in which he lives and by which he is sustained. In order to gratify his biological needs such as hunger and thirst, man has always had to depend upon Nature and in turn has been forced to adjust himself to Nature in his struggle for existence. But man, being rational and inquisitive, has been making attempts to understand the natural world and the laws governing the natural phenomena in order to control them. To put it more candidly, man has been trying to conquer Nature. Aided by science and technology, this desire to conquer outer Nature was immensely whetted and Nature in turn began to suffer. As natural resources became scarce and the environment started rapidly degrading, man too began to suffer. Thus one can see the factual truth that Nature is indispensable for the existence of life on earth, that man himself is in Nature, and that even today he cannot exist without Nature.

---

\*Dr. S. G. NIGAL, Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Academy of Vallabha Vedanta and Research Center, University of Mumbai, Mumbai – 400098, India. Email: [vikasbrahmbhatt@gmail.com](mailto:vikasbrahmbhatt@gmail.com).

### **I. Ecology and Conceptual Environment**

Today we are constantly bombarded with talk of the environment's deterioration and ecological problems such as global warming, deforestation, and animal extinction. Hence, we come across slogans and phrases such as "Save Planet Earth"; "Be Clean, Go Green"; "Plant a Tree, Save a Life." These words of warning and wisdom suggest that man reflects upon his own achievements and failures. Having reviewed what he has done to the environment and biosphere, experts have aptly coined the phrase "ecological rape" to describe the human attack on Nature.

This paper is mainly concerned with modern Western thought, its secularization of man which subsequently has had detrimental impacts on the environment, and how only a divine reverential outlook towards Nature can stop the ecological crisis we face. Ecology is the scientific study of the close bond between organisms and the natural environment. Thus we have human ecology which deals with the interrelationship between man and the environment. Presently, there is immense concern about the effects of human activities on the atmosphere. The most glaring fact to be noted in this connection is the horrible incidence of pollution of air, water and other natural resources, all of which has led to the phenomenon called global warming. Therefore, it is rightly warned that the continued pollution of earth, air, and water, if unchecked, will eventually destroy the fitness of this planet to support life in general and human life in particular.

Man lives in two environments: the external physical environment, which includes a natural atmosphere and living things such as plants and animals, and the conceptual environment, which consists of man's view of the universe and his attitude towards it. One may, for instance, have a purely commercial and exploitative orientation towards Nature, while another may have a reverential outlook towards it. It is these thoughts that motivate man to do certain activities which ultimately affect both the environment and himself. Hence, an analysis of these attitudes is crucial to the study of ecology and to find out the solution of our ecological problems.

Man is not a passive being subject only to the principles of physics, chemistry and Darwinian natural selection. He has been resisting environmental pressures since the dawn of humanity. As a creator, he has been making tremendous progress in scientific knowledge and technological proficiency. With this, man has not remained a helpless victim of the original environment. Ironically, he has instead become a victim of his own scientific achievements and innovations which harness that environment. The human conquest of Nature appears to be moving in the direction of the degradation of man as man. We may experience the elimination of the very existence of human beings from this planet if he fails to pay heed to the ecological problems. This is not to voice a pessimistic note of a prophet of doom, but man will have to think over these issues sincerely and seriously. It will not be enough to ponder over such problems merely from the standpoint of utilitarianism. Man will have to take a philosophical perspective of his ecological niche in the universe and look within to understand why exactly things have become the way they currently are.

## II. A Brief Story of Western Thought

Modern science and technology were mainly developed by the West. It was Francis Bacon, a great British popularizer of science, who once rightly said, "Knowledge is power." This meaningful statement became a motto for those who aspired to conquer Nature. However, Bacon also gave a significant warning which was gradually and conveniently forgotten. He had admonished, "Nature can be conquered only by obeying her" (Bennett and R.J. Chorley, 1978, 14). It is the disregard of this significant ecological warning that has today placed the very fate of human survival on this tiny planet in jeopardy.

The conceptual environment, or the ethos, of Western society has always been dominated by Judeo-Christian ethics, which is anthropocentric. In the story of Genesis, the Bible advises us to fill the earth and subdue it; to have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth (McKibben, 1990, 69). This theological model is a teleological one. According to this scheme, Nature is ordered by the transcendent God's design. Furthermore, it is believed that man is superior to Nature. God created all things for man's sake and therefore, man should have dominion over Nature. The Earth is in the centre of the Universe and man is in the centre of the whole creation. Descartes, a 16th century French philosopher and the father of modern European philosophy averred: "Nature is a great machine to be manipulated by man to suit his own ends." According to him, animals have no soul, no minds, and therefore no feelings. Thus, man is free to do anything necessary for his own good. Such self-centered thinking was similarly preached during the second half of the 19th century by evolutionists like T. H. Huxley and Herbert Spencer who put forth the doctrine of war between man and Nature.

## III. Man and Environment

As a result of the above mentioned thoughts, the relation between man and Nature has come to be conceived of in terms of hostility and even enmity. Nature exists as the enemy of man and therefore it must be conquered by any means. Today, we see the results of this as wild animals are driven to extinction and forests are recklessly destroyed. There is a virtual competition among multi-national companies to exploit natural resources. The only goal is amassing and reinvesting material wealth. Everybody is mainly concerned with raising the standard of living but no one bothers about the standard of life. It is this exploitative attitude towards the environment that is enormously creating ecological disasters. If man has the capacity to make changes in Nature, which he has amply demonstrated through scientific and technical progress, then he must accept responsibility for his varied acts and their harmful consequences on the environment. In this way, man has a responsibility towards Nature, to its flora and fauna, and also to the future generations of mankind. Hence the questions are rightly asked: are we not bringing about a major ecological catastrophe? Are we not heading towards mass suicide? Are we not defrauding the

future human generations? Any well-informed and responsible person will answer these problems in the affirmative. Yes, we are responsible for the ecological imbalance and it is in our hands to restore environmental balance. We can take two measures in this regard: one corrective and the other preventive. Take for instance the pollution of the river Ganges in India. Either we can make efforts to clean up the pollution that we have added into the Ganges, or we can strive to stop the dirtying of the river water itself.

The problem does not end here though. By thinking more deeply, we come to realize that what lies at the root of the ecological problem is the human attitude towards Nature. Is Nature a matter of material utility only? If the answer is yes, then we cannot stop the mindless exploitation or rape of Nature unless we take a long-term view of diminishing utility. Regardless of one's standpoint, man will have to take a more serious look at his relation with Nature and reconsider it. One thing is doubtlessly certain—man exists in the natural world and he has no option but to live together with Nature. Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to this issue reveal the intimate relationship between mankind and the environment. How then can we condemn Nature as the enemy of man?

The horrible truth underlying this problematic attitude is that man himself is being “thingified” or commoditized in modern society. This is the result of the secularization of both man and Nature. According to one view, the secularization of man is the de-spiritualization of man. It is a process of making man worldly by separating man from his religious connection or influence. Thus, secularization of man means making and treating man as no more than a this-worldly animal. Such a man treats Nature as nothing more than the material for a life of pleasures. This attitude then degenerates into an exploitative attitude towards others and more so towards Nature.

It is true that the policy of environmental control once was, and even today in many cases is, adopted—and rightly so—as the means of self-preservation. But the times have changed considerably. This limited view will not suffice. Man must take stock of what he has done to the external Nature and thereby to humanity at large. We are not Leibnizean monads, each living in its enclosed existence apart from all others and Nature. The basic fact about the things and events in the universe is that they are interrelated. J. Krishnamurti's famous quote, “To be is to be related,” seems to be the law of existence. In this connection, Rene DeBos, a microbiologist, writes, “The fundamental law of ecology, it is often said, is that everything is relevant to everything else” (DeBos, 1976, 18). Percy Bysshe Shelley poetically expresses this truth, “Nothing in the world is single; by the law Divine, all things mingle.” Thus, we have to accept the fact not only of interconnectedness, but also of interdependence.

The greatness of man is that only he can understand this fact of universal interrelatedness as well as the relevance of each to all. So the attitude of mindlessly manipulating and exploiting Nature is dangerous and even suicidal. This truth has been very convincingly demonstrated by the findings of biologists, ecologists and other scientists.

So the real question then is: What should be our attitude towards external Nature and also towards the future generations of human beings? Egoistic hedonism has no

answer to this major problem. On the contrary, the doctrine of selfish axiological materialism (one who stresses only secular values) is creating havoc in modern society. This situation is producing widespread cynicism. Oscar Wilde once defined a cynic as a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. This crassly materialistic and commercial cynical attitude must be replaced by a more responsible, humane and even spiritualistic orientation towards oneself, others and the whole of Nature. Anthropocentrism and the consequent arrogance of man must be replaced by an attitude of humility, gratitude and reverence in regards to Nature. The phrase “man’s dominion over nature” should give way to “man’s stewardship of the environment.”

Man is great because he has the capacity to understand his responsibility towards Nature and become its guardian. Humans therefore ought to have a self-imposed obligation to respect animals, plants and Nature. Man will certainly have to use natural resources, but he has no right to misuse or spoil Nature, far less to destroy it. “Our mother is useful but she has a plus value which cannot and should not be measured in terms of material utility,” rightly pleads Shri Pandurang Shastriji Athawale, an Indian philosopher, social activist, and spiritual leader. Our mother, he explains, ought to be respected even though she ceases to be useful in her old age. She serves her children but this does not mean she should be treated as a mere useful housemaid. Of course, even a servant must be treated as a respectable human being. In India, even a cow is respected as a mother. Throughout the world, sane voices in different societies have always used the language of “Mother Nature” or “Mother Earth.” There are hymns on this theme in the holy *Vedas* of the Hindus and other ancient texts of the world. It is heartening to note that once again scholars in modern times are upholding this reverential concept of the Mother Earth. Debos very aptly defends this perspective and writes, “Above and beyond the economic and ecological reasons for the conservation, there are aesthetic and moral ones which are even more compelling. The statement that the Earth is our mother is more than a sentimental platitude” (Debos, 1976, 118).

All these considerations demonstrate an urgent need to save the planet and to maintain the variety in Nature and the harmony between it and man. Morally developed human beings should gratefully recognize the debt they owe to society, to Nature or to the “cosmic intelligence” (God) which is immanent in the universe and also transcends it. It is only man who can appreciate and respond to the beauty and sublimity in natural phenomena such as in landscapes, sunrises, and sunsets. Only man praises a rose for its scent and beauty and extols certain birds for the harmonious quality of their songs. Man has an aesthetic need which the beauty of the Earth satisfies. It is true that man creates a second world within the world of Nature, but still he needs Nature for his survival and his growth as a human being. Thus, human creativity should be so promoted that the beauty in the environment is not damaged. We should not harm the environmental health and thereby the well-being and happiness of the humanity at large.

#### IV. The Way Out

There can be no two opinions about the truth that there should be a cordial and harmonious relationship between humans and the environment. This harmony can be maintained only if we take a reverential attitude towards both life and Nature. Such an attitude must be rooted in a philosophical standpoint like that of Shankara's *Advait Vedānta* or that of *Ishavasyamidamsarvam*<sup>1</sup>; that is, the Divine Reality that resides in me is the Reality that dwells in Nature. In the language of the *Gita* and devotionism, the Reality underlying both man and Nature is God, who may be called by any name. This sort of philosophy engenders love for both God and the Universe, while maintaining man's sense of responsibility for his actions. We are free to maintain or mar the harmony between man and Nature. The above mentioned type of outlook or attitude is found in the way of thinking and way of living of true saints like Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Tukaram and a host of others. For such souls the universe is friendly. Moreover, the world is to be understood as a series of opportunities to be utilized for the comprehensive development of human beings. There is a note of optimism in this outlook, for every difficulty is a sort of opportunity. This view is not against the value of utility. But utility is only one of several values such as beauty, love, gratitude, justice, and truth. Thus, this type of reverential attitude forces man to take a holistic approach to the world, both human and non-human, living and non-living. This attitude will also lead to a more fulfilling life. Understood in this sense, Nature is not an alien and hostile entity that needs to be defeated and conquered.

Furthermore, man must also look within to enable himself to understand and control the greed and lust that exist within. It is this greed, or what is correctly dubbed as "greedy capitalism," that generates the possessive and exploitative attitude in man towards others and Nature. Self-understanding and self-control therefore are essential to stop the dehumanization or brutalization of man. The individual man, society as a whole, and all of the non-human existence in this universe are to be conceived of not as concentric circles but as constituting a spiral system in which anything in the world is continuous with the totality of things and beings in the cosmos. In this view, the destroyer of the ecological balance can be compared to the man who cuts on the wrong side of a branch of the tree on which he sits; it is a self-defeating activity. Thus, the wholesale felling of trees for utterly selfish purposes is both ecologically and practically wrong. The same can be said about the hunting of birds and wild animals for sheer enjoyment. Regardless of whether the earth requires our existence or not, we need the earth with all its beauty and wealth for our own existence and for our own growth as physical, emotional, and spiritual beings. Man is neither the maker nor the master of this planet. Yet it is his responsibility to respect and protect this rich and beautiful earth. Even Julian Huxley, an evolutionist thinker and biologist, is not prepared to leave the course of future development of the human species to the natural cosmic process of biological evolution. Instead, he rightly opts for rational selection in regard to man's future survival. Man's evolution, he remarks, is not biological but

---

<sup>1</sup>*Ishavasyam Upanishad* – Verse 1. (The whole universe is pervaded by the Divine Being or the whole universe is the abode of the Supreme Divine Being)

psychological; it operates by the mechanism of cultural tradition which involves cumulative self-reproduction and self-variation of mental activities and their products. Accordingly, major steps in the human phase of evolution are achieved by breakthroughs in the dominant patterns of mental organization of knowledge, ideas, and beliefs—ideological instead of biological or physiological organization. Further, he writes: “Man’s destiny is to be the sole agent for the future evolution of the planet” (Huxley, 1962, 118). This view establishes human responsibility towards Nature in general.

Sometimes it is said that the earth is a super-organism. Thus it is argued that the phenomenon of pollution is not a serious threat to life in general and human life in particular on this globe. The living earth, like all individual organisms, will always react in such a way as to restore the environment to its original state and ensure its own survival. This view is based upon James Lovelock’s controversial Gaia hypothesis about the earth as he discusses in his 1988 book, *The Ages of Gaia*. Gaia refers to the Greek goddess of Earth. This supposition is very much similar to Greek hylozoism. It implies that man need not worry about the damage he has done to the environment. Moreover, it suggests that to say “we have damaged nature” makes no sense for everything that we do is natural. But this I think is going too far. Our historical experience of the atomic bombs in Japan, the Chernobyl nuclear plant explosion in Soviet Russia, the Bhopal tragedy in India and countless other incidences of the pollution of planetary resources all go counter to the above mentioned thesis. These events clearly illustrate instead how our reckless exploitations have violated the natural equilibrium and done irreversible damage to the environment. Ironically, it was Lovelock himself who later on became the first scientist to measure the persistence of chemicals in the air and had to accept the conceivable hazard that these pollutants posed. In this way, he ultimately ended up refuting his own hypothesis.

Therefore, there is no other way out of this crisis but to develop and adopt a philosophy of life and of the universe, which generates and promotes a reverential attitude towards man and Nature. While practical options, such as planting more trees and banning certain chemicals, can certainly be utilized to aid the present situation, the permanent solution lies only within a complete transformation of mankind’s outlook. It should neither be this-worldly nor other-worldly; it should be holistic and integral. Religion can play a very significant role in this regard provided, as Dr. R. Sundar Rajan has suggested, religion has remained merely a hermeneutics of soul but should become the hermeneutics of man. In this connection, Dr. R. Sundar Rajan writes: “A fundamental transformation of our social consciousness of the natural world will come about only when the principle for reverence and responsibility for non-human life becomes a moral regulative” (Bhatt, 1985, 180 ). He also mentions the fact that some Christian theologians are trying to revive the philosophical thoughts of Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), a German uneducated mystic, and F.W.J. Schelling (1725-1854), a German idealist. These thinkers advocate a philosophy of Nature which comes very close to the spiritual non-dualism, or *Advait Vedānta*, of The Upanishads in general and Shankara in particular. For instance, Boehme has said: “In all the processes of Nature, God is concealed; only in the spirit of Man is He recognized ... God is not sundered from Nature but is related to it as the soul to the

body” (Hoffding, 1855, 71). Schelling also writes, “Nature is visible spirit and spirit invisible Nature.” At one place he remarks, “Nature herself is a great poem” (Thilly, 1955, 467). What Boehme and Schelling want to support is that Nature is not merely the dead material substance. It is alive and it is intricately woven together by a common thread with every other living entity in this universe, including human life. Religion must stress the multi-dimensional Nature of man and preach the doctrine of integral-ism in regard to empirical, social, moral and spiritual values. Surprisingly, such a doctrine is supported by both *Vedānta* and *Sāṅkhya* philosophies in India. Nature (*Prakṛiti*), according to *Sāṅkhya*, strives for both material enjoyment (*Bhogārtha*) and spiritual liberation (*Mokshārtha*) of the individual soul. Moreover, *Vedānta* asserts that the Universe is the manifestation of the Divine and is rooted in It. So there is harmony between man and Nature. Such an attitude is called Bhakti (Loving Devotion to the Supreme Being who supports, pervades, and permeates the whole of the cosmos). Such pure love will not allow a devotee to sit idle when mankind is facing an ecological crisis.

In conclusion, it can be said that man is a moral entity, for only human actions are capable of being characterized as moral or immoral, rational or irrational. So it is his responsibility to preserve the Earth’s fitness for his continued existence. In this connection, it has generally been accepted by modern thinkers like Bruce Allsopp and biologists like Julian Huxley that man has become a major force in the ecology of the Earth. He can be either creative or destructive; and therefore has moral duty of trusteeship for Nature. The exercise of this trusteeship depends upon his recovering the sense of respect which has become depraved in utilitarian industrial societies. Simply put, the ball is in mankind’s court; it is up to us to decide what we will do. It is heartening to note that many institutions, organizations, and even eminent individuals are engaged in the creation of ecological awareness in the minds of the people and their leaders. There is an explosion of knowledge but what is scarce is wisdom and although knowledge comes, it is wisdom that lingers. Global warming is a serious and real phenomenon. If it is not dealt with immediately, man may be left to face his own extinction. While thinking globally is good, acting locally is better. Let us hope that man becomes wiser by experience, acts like a responsible trustee and steward of the environment, saves this planet from man-made calamities and thereby preserves life on this lovely planet. Let us also hope that man realizes the Divine Truth that God helps those who help themselves.

*Acknowledgement: In the process of having my article accepted by the Journal of East-West Thought, I had many people who played an influential role in providing me with constructive criticism that allowed me to deliver the final product. Of those people I would like to both acknowledge and thank the three anonymous reviewers of the Journal of East-West Thought for their recommendations as it allowed me to, in turn, better my article.*



### References

- Bennett, R. J., and R. Chorley. 1978. *Environmental Systems, Philosophy, Analysis and Control*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Bhatt, S. R.. 1985. *Reality, Knowledge and Value*. Delhi.
- Debos, Rene. 1976. *A God within: A Positive View of Mankind's Future*. London: Spere Books Ltd..
- Hoffding, H.. 1955. *A History of Modern Philosophy*, Vol I.. Power Publication.
- Huxley, Julian. 1962. *The Essays of a Humanist*. London: Penguin Books.
- Ishavashyam *Upanishad Verse 1*.
- McKibben, Bill. 1990. *The End of Nature*. London: Penguin Books.
- Thilly, Frank. 1955. *A History of Philosophy*. Ed. L. Wood. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

