

Nature and culture

In the twentieth century, the relationship between the concepts of nature and culture has undergone significant changes, or even questionings or reversals in value, which are fairly representative of the general state of contemporary thinking.

I.1. In fact, traditionally ('traditionally' referring to the period preceding the thought transformations that occurred from the first years of the twentieth century in the realm of physics and also in anthropology), relations between nature and culture have been characterised by differences, or even opposition, between the two concepts.

At one level, what has traditionally characterised culture and distinguished it from nature has been artifice, custom and convention. Culture is a human institution, and as such it reflects the exercise of will, or at least, a set of intended meanings: culture is a world where rules and values operate. These, however, relate to human action, and are, so to speak, victims of its inconstancy: culture is also the domain of diversity of beliefs, of inconsistency of passions, even of contradiction in human decisions. Nature, on the other hand, presents itself as a reality characterised by permanence, stability, regularity. The recurrence of seasons and blooming, the constancy of living forms, but also of the material world, cause nature to be a kind of guarantee of the substantiality of being: the fact that things have a nature gives them a sort of solidity on which humanity can rely in its actions and its enterprises. Nature conceals a sort of truth that should be discovered. Generally speaking, this underlying substance is the subject of science. Geography, which considers itself a science, also poses the question of the reality of the divisions of space on the Earth's surface, and distinguishes (at least did so until the nineteenth century) between natural divisions of space and divisions based on languages, forms of government, customs and beliefs. If for a long time geography relied on nature, this was not contrary to what a certain historiography would have us believe—because of an immoderate love of determinism, but because this nature bestowed upon it a sort of scientific legitimacy. At a different level, nature and culture have been distinguished from the standpoint of freedom of action. Naturalness is, first of all, spontaneous, instinctive, unreasoned, that is, it makes no use of deliberative thinking, judgment or reflection, which to the contrary, characterise the use of freedom, i.e., of voluntary action. To be free is to act according to a preliminary deliberation and representation, while the animal or the child, for example (beings that have not been cultivated), merely reacts to solicitations from its environment. Therefore, in line with what we have just said, naturalness is also that which is constrained, determined: the natural being behaves in relation to and is dependent upon, causes from the outside that apply to him in such a way as to permit no escape from them, or, at best, leave him little room to react. Nature is then considered to be the operation of a strict mechanism. On the other hand, as Rousseau emphasised, freedom as well as culture are characterised by the power of the human being to escape from rules he has defined for himself, to reject them or to invent new ones. This is still artifice, but in the positive sense of the invention of new forms of existence, which cannot be derived from nature and its defined order. From this we can conclude that, like the other human sciences, this aspect of geography that denies all natural determinism is a science of freedom, or at least, in principle, a science of culture.

I.2. In fact, the theoretical framework that has just been sketched out is less rigid than it may seem. Several transitional formulas or situations that are also related to geography might be mentioned in this connection.

On the one hand indeed, according to Rousseau as well as to others, nature or, more exactly, naturalness, may have been considered to involve ethical standards or ideals. In this moral perspective, naturalness is everything that is true, genuine, or even healthy, and whatever departs from it, in attitudes or ways of thinking, is seen as degradation or decadence. The recycling of domestic waste, mountain hiking and 'bio' products carry ideals for human behaviour. Nature is, in this sense, a cultural standard. On the other hand, culture may have been conceived as the finality and future of nature. In this case, nature is viewed as a bundle of material resources and stocks of energy, which are chiefly characterised by their non-determination. Culture must then be understood as an activity that consists in using these resources and energies, and in so doing, gives them determination, or, in other words, meaning. Nature is cultivated, which means that it is both developed and shaped, within man as well as around him. Education, agriculture, technique in general, are different examples of this 'modelling' of nature by culture. But it is possible that it is within the human being himself that the relationship between nature and culture is marked by a constitutive ambiguity. As Merleau-Ponty writes, it is impossible "to superimpose on man a lower layer of behaviour that one chooses to call 'natural', followed by a manufactured cultural or spiritual world. Everything in man is both manufactured and natural [...], in the sense that there is not a word, not a form of behaviour that does not owe something to purely biological being—while at the same time it moves beyond the basic nature, the constraints, of animal life, and causes forms of vital behaviour to deviate from their pre-ordained direction, through a sort of release, and through a genius for ambiguity that could serve to define man". In the specific domain of geography, the very notion of a geographical environment, whatever the changes this notion may have undergone (from Vidal de la Blache to Berque), but also the notion of landscape, make it possible to handle this ambiguity, which is constitutive of the human.

II. Until now, however, whatever the form of the relationship between nature and culture, nature has been considered, chronologically and ontologically, to be in the front position. Culture followed nature, which was, so to speak, its frame. Today this intellectual configuration, this precedence, is on the verge of changing. Following are three examples of this:

II.1. Until the first half of the twentieth century the idea persisted that physical nature represented an objective reality to be described and explained, a reality located outside of man, which man faced in some way, attempting to adopt a scientific and objective view of it. Discoveries and theories of quantum physics have seriously challenged this belief. In a famous text, Heisenberg came to the general conclusion that can be drawn from one of the main aspects of quantum mechanics, which has led to a questioning of the habitual realism of classical physics: when we apply a measuring device to a quantum system, when, more precisely, we aim to measure the behaviour of a particle by means of a device, an interaction takes place, i.e., a transfer of energy between the measuring device and the measured quantum system, and hence an irreversible and unpredictable modification of the behaviour of the particle. For example, it is impossible to determine at the same time the location of a particle in space-time and its energy quantum. This perturbation of the measured object by the measuring device is generally neglected in the description of macroscopic phenomena (those related to everyday life). But it cannot be neglected at the microscopic level: this means that the definition of the natural phenomenon depends strictly on the initial conditions as well as on the measurement theory in use. The consequence that Heisenberg deduces from this is firm: what physicists apprehend when they work at the microscopic level, the knowledge they obtain, is not the natural phenomenon in itself as independent from the observer, but an effect of the interaction between man's technical and cognitive act and a reality that cannot be reached directly. At the microscopic level, the physical, or natural object cannot be concretely described. It is just a mental scheme. In 1927, at the Como conference, Niels Bohr stated: "There is no quantum world: There is only an abstract quantum physical description." He added: "It is wrong to think that the task of physics is to find out how nature is. Physics concerns what we can say about nature." As for Heisenberg, he concluded that science "is but a link in the infinite chain of man's argument with nature, and [...] cannot simply speak of 'nature in itself'. Science always presupposes the existence of man [...]" In conclusion: nature always pre-supposes culture, which is the framework for its analysis and interpretation.

II.2. A second example: the notion of natural environment. Ecology is the sign of a fundamental reversal in the practical relationship of man and nature. There is new ethical meaning to this relationship. This new ethical meaning is made of the planetary, global and irreversible, and hence radical dimension of the risks incurred by nature. This break in the scale of risk (from local to global) makes it possible to formulate the problem in a direct and perhaps stark way. We are seeing a radical modification of the conditions of human action in the world: for the first time in the history of mankind, as Paul Ricœur says, "celle-ci [humankind] est capable d'actions dont les effets dangereux sont de nature cosmique." Hence the ethical and ontological meaning of the relationship between man and nature is significantly modified, even reversed: nature, which until this time, could be thought to provide a set of stable conditions for the unfolding of human history, a sort of shelter, as it were, under which the human drama could be played out, is from now on, to the contrary, "left in the custody of man", on whom a new responsibility is conferred.

To emphasise the point: nature, or better, the natural condition (the conditions necessary for bare existence), which until the present time could be conceived of in terms of necessity, of substantiality, is globally vulnerable, as an eminently fragile condition, to be preserved as is, to be maintained for itself. What prevails now is the feeling that the natural conditions of existence are perishable, and a recognition of the problem that the human as a living being is endangered. But beyond this, the feeling of precariousness leads to a new ethical questioning, about the future possibilities for a world inhabitable by mankind, i.e., the future of culture.

II.3. Anthropology (a third example) has as it were sanctioned at the scientific level this reversal of direction in the man/nature relationship. Today it is possible to speak without paradox of an anthropology of nature. This anthropology intends to be non-dualistic: it rejects the alternative of naturalism and culturalism, the break into nature and culture, which it attributes to a Western cultural bias. Philippe Descola writes: "Bien des sociétés dites primitives nous invitent à un tel dépassement, elles qui n'ont jamais songé que les frontières de l'humanité s'arrêtaient aux portes de l'espèce humaine, elles qui n'hésitent pas à inviter dans le concert de leur vie sociale les plus modestes plantes, les plus insignifiants des animaux." Henceforth, we should think of nature and the beings that make it up as functions of culture, and integrate into the subjects of anthropology, alongside the human being, "toute cette collectivité des existants liée à lui et longtemps reléguée dans une fonction d'entourage."

These three examples show us that the question of the relationship between nature and culture seems no longer to be one of a harmony or disharmony between two fundamentally distinct worlds, but rather of the delineation and articulation, within culture itself, of what can be designated, thought and experienced as 'nature'.

Bibliographie

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