# *The Problem with Purity*

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# 1

We have a problem with purity. By "we" I mean, in descending order, all of us, collectively, as Americans; I mean environmentalists, of whom I still consider myself one; and I mean American intellectuals, particularly academics, of whom I am certainly one.

Our problem with purity rises from a search for values that might give us a dependable guide to avoid the horrors that have marked the twentieth century. Whatever problems the future holds, it's nice to be pulling out of the twentieth century: two world wars, the Depression, the Holocaust, massive famines, repression, racism, murders on an industrial scale. Historians tend to resist nostalgia. Not that, all things considered, we are without problems now. There is, just to mention the environmental problems, global warming and the diminishing ozone layer; there is rapid and pronounced extinction of species. There already a lack of clean water for most of the world's population and the oceanic fisheries are crashing.

The instincts that lead us away from such horrors toward purity are admirable. We want rules, a set of values, that can both explain why human beings cause such things to happen and prevent them from happening again. What many of us have done, myself included, is to find the root of many of the horrors of our time in categorical mistakes, confusing one thing with another, and in transgressing forbidden boundaries. We have logically deduced that the solution is purity: keeping the categories separate, the boundaries intact.

This sounds abstract, an intellectual formulation, but I don't think it is. Two examples can show what I mean. Racism is, for example, a confusion of categories that has in the twentieth century cost tens of millions of people their lives and blighted the lives of

hundreds of millions of others. In racism some physical marker such as skin color is taken as a sign of ineradicable qualities such as intelligence or morality so that a glance can tell you all you need to know about a person. We have confused biology with culture and society. We have looked toward nature when we should have been looking at culture. Similarly, many people regard our environmental problems as a transgression of boundaries. In Barry Commoner's famous formulation, "Nature knows best," and we have endangered the planet and ourselves by inserting our culture and our technology into realms like the ozone layer, or the climate, or the rain forest where they don't belong. The solution, again, is purity. Follow nature in nature's domain.

These are not silly positions. Culture is culture and biology is biology, and when we completely confuse the two, we do produce racism and sexism. Our interventions into the natural world for all their technical achievement have produced some very dangerous results. The boundaries seemingly must hold.

Yet we fear that the boundaries aren't holding, and some people believe, or profess to believe, that they have collapsed forever. These fears are particularly pronounced in regard to the environmental front, among both intellectuals and activists.[1] The battle is over, and Nature has lost. There is no more nature to defend: nature can't be saved because it has already disappeared. "Postmodernism," as Fredric Jameson writes, "is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good."[2] The quite literal eradication of the natural, the other-than-human, is not confined to academic theory; it also appears in best-selling books, such as Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature.*[3] What they

[1] Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

[2] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. ix, 170, 366.

[3] Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989).

mean is that nature as other, nature as separate and alien, is dead, kaput, vanished. We have touched everything, our mark is everywhere; there is nothing left but us.

Most people are not postmodernists. Even postmodernists are not, for most of the day, postmodernists. And although enough people are willing to listen to Bill McKibben to make his book a best seller, they don't act as if they believe nature is dead. People go on preserving wild lands, planting gardens, hiking in the mountains, worrying about floods, wildfires, and earthquakes.

They also go on hoping for some standard that is clear and powerful enough—pure enough—to serve as a guide through a complicated and dangerous world. We live in an age where the human ability to shape nature, on scales that vary from individual genes to the entire globe, is both real and astonishing. We have seemingly perfected the ability to so calibrate control and danger that they increase in tandem. We are awed and frightened by our own power. We search for something to guide us, some pure entity ultimately distinct from us, yet which has our best interests at heart.

This is essentially a religious impulse, but it takes secular form; and while many people are willing to believe that the Force is with us, we have predictable problems agreeing on what secular form the Force takes. The favorite forms of the Force are usually Nature and the Market. The answer to our problems is either the Market knows best or Nature knows best. These are the pure entities that will lead us through a mixed and dirty world.

This is comforting as long as we don't think about it too much. I opened the newspaper in February to find President Clinton informing the nation that "[n]on-native plants and animals are upsetting nature's balance, squeezing out native species, causing severe economic damage and transforming our landscape." He was denouncing some real and expensive environmental nuisances such as star thistle and zebra mitten crabs that threaten such surprising

marks of nature's balance in North America as cattle and irrigation works.[4] It is not that ecological invasions are not real and have not done real damage, but I wonder where President Clinton thinks he and those cows came from? Those of us whose ancestors have come from elsewhere over the last five centuries have long been softening up the continent for such laggards as start thistle and zebra mitten crabs. To denounce them for disturbing nature's balance is like General Custer denouncing the Seventh Cavalry for disturbing the Sioux. But more than that, denouncing ecological invasion and praising nature's balance at the end of the millennium is not shutting the barn door after the horse has left; it is shutting the barn door after the horse has died and the barn has fallen down. Appeals to nature and its balance are appeals to purity, but nature is not as reliable a guide if we have been for centuries so inextricably tangled in the natural world that traces of nature are everywhere in us and traces of us have infiltrated more and more of nature.

The market is no better. By its advocates' own definition, the market is a reflection of human desires, and so has some limits as the Force. In practice the market depends as much on manipulating human desires as on fulfilling them and, in any case, the natural world does not respond to advertising campaigns as eagerly as we might wish. At least publicly, our ability to think about what is going on seems trapped in ways that either fail to describe the world we live in or else rehearse versions of invisible hands or pristine balance that have little to do with the world we have made.

We cannot escape the paradox of control and danger by appealing to some larger force that will inevitably lead us to the best of all possible worlds. We may very well have arrived in Oz, because, in fact, the market never speaks and nature never speaks; instead various oracles claim to speak for them. We grant these oracles authority that they do not of themselves possess. Our various wizards are

[4] *San Jose Mercury News,* February 4, 1999, pp. 1A, 16A.

knock-offs of the Wizard of Oz, who explained his rise to wizardry after his balloon was blown off course and landed in Oz by telling Dorothy, in one of the movie lines that really resonates for the middle-aged, that times being what they were, he took the position.

## 2

"That times being what they were, I took the position" is a nice epitaph for the end of the twentieth century. It may be time to make the best of what we have, and if we are going to try to fool others, we should avoid fooling ourselves. I realize that any person whose favorite character in *The Wizard of Oz* is the wizard has some explaining to do if he is lecturing on human values. I am here to try to justify mixed and dirty worlds. It is not a position to which I expected my intellectual life or my disciplinary training as a historian would lead me.

I don't want to pretend my own intellectual life is some kind of epic journey. It has been concerned with issues such as race and nature, but at one end, it has the Navajo Tribal Archives, which, when I did research there, were housed in a doublewide in Window Rock. I slept in the parking lot. Someone (I was never sure who exactly he was) gave me the key and told me to answer the phone. I didn't see him again for three days. At the other end are the Walt Disney Studios. One building in the complex that houses the archives there is decorated to look like it is being held up by the seven dwarves, but the dwarves are forty feet tall. Forty-foot dwarves are not only architecturally disconcerting, they are conceptually disturbing. Is a forty-foot dwarf still a dwarf? Or is it now a giant disguised to look like a dwarf? Doublewides and forty-foot dwarves pretty much bracket my academic career to date. I mention them now to keep things in perspective, but I do think that important issues lurk in unlikely places.

I also think that since three zeros on the calendar tend to fix people's attention, this is a handy time for reassessment. There is reason to reassess. I have a favorite cartoon. It shows three stone-age guys trying to push a rock the size of this building. There is a fourth guy off to the side watching them. He is saying: "Wait a minute, this is getting us nowhere." The title of the cartoon is "The Dawn of Reason."

I think purity is getting us nowhere. I appreciate the instincts that push us toward it; I share a fear of the problems that it addresses. And I realize that when I attack purity, people can think that I am actually an advocate for the problems purity seeks to solve. I might be remembered as the guy who gave the Tanner Lectures and defended racism and global warming. I went to Catholic school. I was taught by nuns. I don't attack purity lightly.

My doubts about purity partly grew out of my own work. There is nothing like a failed project to concentrate your attention. I have spent the last three years, among other things, writing and rewriting and rewriting a set of essays that I had tentatively entitled "Thinking with Nature."

Thinking with nature is a habit of mind, and it is best explained by example. In the essays I look at Thomas Jefferson and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Susan Cooper and John Muir, but I'll draw my example from the most influential of twentieth-century Americans: Walt Disney.

The example that I have in mind is Bambi. You might think that a Stanford professor taking on Bambi is a bit much, but I'd argue that Walt Disney and his animals, cartoon and real, are probably the most significant influences on how Americans think about the natural world in the late twentieth century. And in any case, Disney is a wonderful example of thinking with nature because he did it so consciously and so explicitly. He sought in his films to portray a real nature, one true to life (as he emphasized in his True-Life Adventure films), but one that also communicated

basic social values, usually without ever showing a human being, indeed often by making human beings threats to nature.[5] Disney's animals had feelings, hopes, families and friends, and most of all they had personality. And since they were quite consciously human analogues, the audience sympathized with them. But the message went farther than this. Bambi, for example, was not just a distinct member of a forest community. Bambi had to learn proper values; he had to learn American individualism. In dialogue cut from the final film but preserved pictorially in the scene where the Prince of the Forest arrived after the death of Bambi's mother, Disney himself summarized the message: "Why couldn't he say YOU'VE GOT TO LEARN TO WALK ALONE. . . . He believes you have to take things as they come and face facts. That's his philosophy—the philosophy of anyone who is going to survive in the forest."[6] But, of course, this is not the philosophy of the forest. This is the philosophy of Walt Disney and American individualism. What is happening here is indicative of the film's double nature and the habit of thinking with nature. The appeal is to a transparent "real" nature—the forest—while it is reflective of the audience's supposed emotions and values: individualism.

Bambi is an exercise in thinking with nature, and Disney is doing what thinking with nature trains us to do so well: embedding our basic social values in nature so that they seem universal expressions of the natural world itself. When we see nature, we read out culture. When we justify our culture, we ground it in nature. Disney's animals were allegorical characters standing in for humans; but his animals were also animals, and the characteristics that applied to them and to humans must be universal traits—rules of

[5] Walt Disney, "Why I Like Making Nature Films," reprinted from *Woman's Home Companion* (May 1954) in Kathy Jackson, *Walt Disney: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 122.

[6] Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas, *Bambi: The Story and the Film* (New York: n. p., 1990), p. 174.

nature—that jump over the boundary that otherwise separates humans from animals.[7] This is thinking with nature.[8]

I began writing the essays because I thought that thinking with nature was bad. When we confuse the categories of the natural and the social, it becomes impossible to think clearly about either society or nature. I had no problem with cartoons. I just didn't want them becoming social policy. So starting with Thomas Jefferson and ending with Walt Disney, I was going to show the confusion of categories and the problems that it created. The problems were basic. We reduced gender—the cultural roles we ascribe to men and women—to biology. We naturalized them. We reduced race—a cultural construction in which certain intellectual and moral qualities are attached to physical markings, usually skin color—to biology. We naturalized it. We confused the social and the natural.

My attack was pretty conventional, and it had two blind spots. The first blind spot was predictable: I was condemning what I myself did. I, too, mixed together the cultural and the natural. The second was more disturbing, when I thought about it; what I was condemning—thinking with nature—might not always be such a bad thing.

There were two moments that caused me to reconsider my attempts to maintain the boundaries. The first came when I realized my left hand seemed serenely unaware of what my right hand was doing. On the one hand, I was working on a project that condemned the confusion of the cultural and the natural, but on the other hand I had just written another book, *The Organic Machine,* pointing out that the cultural and the natural were, in fact, mingled, confused, and increasingly impossible to separate.

[7] Disney, "Why I Like Making Nature Films," p. 122.

[8] It is close to what Simon Schaffer means when he writes "The natural and the social are hard to tease apart. Social relations are naturalized and nature appropriated by the social order" (Simon Schaffer, "The Earth's Fertility as a Social Fact in Early Modern Britain," in *Nature and Society in Historical Context,* ed. Mikulás Teich, Roy Porter, and Bo Gustafsson [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997], p. 124).

*The Organic Machine* was an attempt to escape from the declensionist narrative of environmental history. Most environmental histories tell a single story over and over again. It is really the Judeo-Christian story of the fall, sin, and the expulsion from Eden. Once, the story goes, human beings lived in paradise, but they sinned, and because of their sin they were expelled. In environmental history the sin was defiling paradise, and the defilers became Europeans and their descendants, who, not exactly learning from their mistakes, have spent the last half millennium finding new paradises inhabited by people who maintained their environmental innocence and mucking them up.

When deep cultural stories begin to pass as history, there is cause for suspicion, and *The Organic Machine* was an attempt to tell a different story. *The Organic Machine* is about the Columbia River, and its thesis is that the best way to understand the river is as an entity that has been in constant flux. Gradually human beings have modified it. They have created the illusion of conquering the river, of turning it, as the common phrase is in the Pacific Northwest, into a series of slackwater lakes. We apply social language to the river. We have raped it or killed it; but such language is deceptive. We have changed the Columbia to the detriment of some species and the benefit of others. Where once the Columbia said salmon, it now says shad and squawfish. The Columbia is not dead, as we may find out this spring when an immense snowpack in the Northwest melts. The dams depend on larger natural rhythms of snowfall and snowmelt, of rain and gravity and seasons, but we have created a system where what is natural and what is human becomes harder and harder to distinguish. Each intrudes on and influences the other. The river has become an organic machine. Denouncing thinking with nature on the one hand and describing organic machines on the other leads to some seeming inconsistencies.

The contradiction between condemning thinking with nature and writing *The Organic Machine* was only the first moment of

doubt; the second came when I encountered people who were far ahead of me when it came to abjuring thinking with nature, and it caused me to question how far down this particular road I was willing to go. They not only didn't want to think with nature; they were ready to leave a world of nature entirely behind and turn themselves into very unorganic machines.

Katherine Hayles, a literary critic, gave a talk at the University of Washington several years ago on why it is important that human beings have bodies. The point was that being embodied was a critical part of our knowledge of, experience in, and thinking about the world. Our bodies are the nature in us. The talk was engaging and interesting, but I was puzzled as to who exactly formed the other side of this argument. Who thought human beings didn't need bodies? I found out. It was the guys in the front row (and they were all guys). They were from the virtual reality lab at the University of Washington. They were angry.

Bodies were in their view vestigial, nothing more than one large appendix that had outlived its usefulness. In the future, consciousness, which reduced down to electrical signals, would be systematically downloaded into a machine. We could, presuming no one pulled the plug, live forever free of sickness, aging, fat, balding, menstrual periods, arthritis, and all the pains of being embodied.

I like to think of myself as a progressive guy, but I don't think I want to go there even as I find myself with a middle-aged body that often refuses to do what I ask it to do. But if I insist that our having a body is essential to thinking about desirable forms of human culture and society, then it seems that I am opening the back door on thinking with nature even as I shut the front door. Who we are, how we act in the world, what we know about the world—all the things that I on the one hand wanted to ascribe purely to culture—seemed on the other hand to depend on our being embodied, to being ourselves to some degree natural.

I had hoped that my essays on thinking with nature would re-

duce the habit of mind to a categorical mistake; a mistake that you had only to reveal, as when Toto pulled the curtain on the Wizard of Oz, and it would lose its power. But our very embodied condition and the organic machines that we have created led me to think that I had oversimplified things. Thinking with nature was more complicated than I had thought. Purity presented far more problems than I had anticipated.

## 3

Having created a mixed and dirty world in which what is cultural and what is natural becomes less and less clear and as hybrids of the two become more and more common, what do we do? Having recognized that we ourselves—embodied as we are—are the ultimate hybrids of the cultural and the natural, how do we understand ourselves and the world that we shape? On the one hand, we cannot deny either the social horrors that come from deep confusions of the social and the natural or the problems that we have created by our increasingly powerful interventions into the natural world. On the other hand, we cannot deny that the social and the natural are inextricably mixed and that the natural world is, for better or worse, already a result of our past actions.

These are very late twentieth century problems, but for me they echo the thinking of a figure from the beginning of the republic: Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson thought with nature. This is not surprising. Jefferson and his contemporaries were immersed in nature. James Madison writing to Thomas Jefferson in 1788 kept a close eye on both the chances for the ratification of the constitution and spring frosts: "it does not appear that any thing less vulnerable than young cucumbers has been injured."[9] Madison was writing to a man who spent his life giving attention to weather,

[9] James Madison to Jefferson, April 22, 1788, in Julian Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 13:98–99.

orchards, dung, brick-earth, peas, peaches, firewood, clover, and soil washing off of hills.[10] In the wake of the constitution's ratification, the two future presidents happily botanized together.[11]

Jefferson's thinking with nature shows both the complexity of this habit of mind and its shifting valence. Jefferson thought with nature to argue for American independence—"the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature's God" entitled us—and for natural rights. But Jefferson also thought with nature to justify the inferior position of African Americans by arguing that "nature had been less bountiful to them" in intelligence and that nature demanded they be kept separate from whites.[12] Knowing as we know now about Jefferson's own relationship with his slave Sally Hemings, who was also his wife's half-sister, we realize that when he argued for the inferiority of African Americans, he was proclaiming the inferiority of his own lover and at least one of his children. This highlights not only Jefferson's own flaws and limits, but how tangled this habit of mind is. It does not always appear in purely progressive and reactionary packages that can be separated.

Jefferson, it seems to me, becomes only more useful to us as his own flaws, limits, and contradictions become apparent. Natural rights and racist claims for African American inferiority are the poles of Jefferson's thinking with nature. The meaning of these things for us (and for Jefferson) changes and becomes more tangled precisely because of Jefferson's own embodied being in the world. The sex he had with Sally Hemings, the labor of his slaves that he depended on, the children that he fathered: all of these rightly shape how we read his proclamations about nature and so-

[10] See Robert C. Baron, ed., *The Garden and Farm Books of Thomas Jefferson* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum, 1987).

[11] Jefferson to Thomas Randolph, June 5, 1791, in Baron, *The Garden and Farm Books of Thomas Jefferson,* p. 185.

[12] Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia,* ed. William Peden (New York: W. W. Norton, 1954), p. 142.

ciety. The contradictions and the impurities don't negate his glittering abstractions: they illuminate them.

Direct appeals to nature to justify human social orders and values seem always to go wrong, just as attempts to preserve a pure nature by defining human beings as separate from nature seem to be hopelessly flawed. It is our bodies that are the problem. Attempts to reduce what we do and think to our bodies—our nature—don't work, but neither do attempts to ignore our embodied existence, the nature in us.

Jefferson in his less grandiose moments knew this. When Jefferson thought about society and the kind of republican values he wished to cultivate, he rarely did so without considering the labor of the human body and its work in the natural world. Jefferson's famous formulation, "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue," appears to be a rather crude version of thinking with nature.[13] But looked at closely, his praise of farmers made them part of an intricate set of mediations between nature on the one hand and particular forms of human society on the other. "The spontaneous energies of the earth are a gift of nature," Jefferson wrote in a characteristic passage, "but they require the labor of man to direct their operation. And the question is so to husband his labor as to turn the greatest quantity of this useful action of the earth to his benefit."[14]

For Jefferson, all farming was not equal. Olives encouraged one way of life, tobacco another. Nature, in the form of climate and soil, limited but did not determine such choices. Nature affected society, but not directly. The key for Jefferson was an array of mediating factors—the size and type of landholding, the technology

[13] Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia,* pp. 164–65.

[14] Jefferson to Charles Wilson Peale, April 17, 1813, in Baron, *Garden and Farm Books of Thomas Jefferson,* p. 202.

used, the crops and animals raised, the way labor was organized. Jefferson's emphasis on the human mediations that translated nature into human society gave his thinking with nature a flexibility and a sense of possibility that underlined the malleability of both nature and human society. The benefit agriculture yielded to society through these multiple mediations was not just crops and wealth, but the fundamental goods of social life itself.[15] The particular connections and results Jefferson postulated might at times be wacky, but the concentration on complicated mediations was not.

But if a stress on the numerous mediations that guide the intersection of the social and the natural is both a form of thinking with nature and a way to avoid some of the social dilemmas of thinking with nature, what is the solution to the mixed and dirty, hybrid material world that we have created? This is a world that is increasingly neither cultural nor natural but a mixture of both.

I would suggest that a beginning of a way out lies with an abandonment of fitting everything into pure categories and accepting a series of finer gradations as we take responsibility for a world that we are creating. Thinking with nature, for all its faults and dangers, warns against an absolute disentanglement of the natural and the social. And, similarly, our efforts to save nature should not lead to an attempt to disentangle it completely from the social.

The best way to give you a sense of what I mean is to close with a story. In Seattle, where I lived until last year, there are bald eagles nesting in the city, peregrine falcons amidst the skyscrapers, at least one coyote in an elevator, and mountain lions too close for many people's comfort. My students on their way to the Cascades pitied these animals; they regarded them as somehow diminished, the natural world on welfare. I have come to take comfort in them.

A moment nearly three years ago marked my own changing

[15] Jefferson to George Washington, August 15, 1787; Boyd, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson,* 12:38.

views on these things, a moment when I could let purity go. There was a large run of sockeye salmon into Seattle's Lake Washington that year. It was, fishery managers warned, an anomaly, a consequence of near-perfect ocean conditions and, for the moment, diminished fishing pressure in the North Pacific. Hundreds of thousands of fish ran into Elliott Bay and on to Lake Washington. For the first time in years, hundreds of small boats appeared to catch them, and tens of thousands of people came out to view them.

It seemed a triumphal return to nature in defiance of the city, but it was no such thing. The vast majority of the sockeye did not seek natal streams; they ran toward the fishponds and hatchery at the University of Washington campus. Lake Washington had never had a significant sockeye run until the turn of the century, when Seattle constructed the ship canal that linked Puget Sound, Lake Union, and Lake Washington. This was a planted run, moving through a concrete corridor with fish ladders on toward the stainless steel tanks and knives where they would end their lives. But these fish in their tens of thousands hardly seemed lesser fish for all of that.

The fish became the leading tourist attraction in Seattle during their run, and most of the people who came to see them lived in the city and its suburbs. And, at first, I thought that they were there because the return of the fish reminded them of what the region had been before the salmon declined. They were there to recollect a fuller past. But given the demographics of Seattle, this is unlikely. Most adult Seattleites didn't live there when salmon were abundant. They came to see the salmon, I think, in order to glimpse a possible future that contained Seattle and salmon. They were there to see a hybrid world that, at least for a few weeks, worked. There is a hope in that for which I would gladly surrender purity.

I am a historian; I see little evidence that people change their values or ways of thinking easily or quickly. But I do see evidence

that our values and our ways of thinking contain multiple possibilities. Our values are often as contradictory as our thinking is paradoxical. And this is good news rather than bad because it creates possibilities for change without calling for the wholesale transformation of human values and ways of thinking. We can and do change without mass conversion experiences. It is easier to get a change of emphasis than a change of heart. Sometimes we need someone who can point out unconsidered implications of how we already think more than we need an oracle or a prophet. Aldo Leopold's call for a new set of values, a conservation ethic, in time, won a lot of readers for *Sand County Almanac,* but he converted very few people to a new way of thinking. Rachel Carson appealed for a new application of existing values and ignited a mass environmental movement. We don't need prophets. We don't need appeals to the Force. We need a cold assessment of the possibilities for the future, good as well as bad, that our own complicated and paradoxical values and our own messy embodiment in the natural world contain.