

Four Western Views of Nature

Overview

- Nature as **inferior**: *Transcendental dualism*
- Nature as **chaotic & dangerous**: *Puritanism*
- Nature as **orderly & useful**: *The Enlightenment*
- Nature as **sublime**: *Romanticism*



Transcendental Dualism: nature as separate and inferior

- “*Dualism*”: binary split into two. “*Transcendental*”: one of the two is higher and is related to transcendental reality.
- Developed in ancient Greek philosophy, revived in 18th century rationalist philosophy.
 - ❖ There are **two realms of reality**: the natural world, and a transcendental world, which has highest spiritual reality.
 - ❖ **Human nature is dualistic**: mind versus body, reason versus emotions, with mind and reason corresponding to the transcendental realm, the body and emotions part of the natural world.



Transcendental Dualism

- ❖ **Social dualism:** sex and race showed same dualism: men (associated with mind and reason) higher than women (associated with body and emotions).
- ❖ **Nature-culture dualism:** Culture is associated with mind, males, and the transcendent. Nature is associated with body, females, and is inferior to culture.
- ❖ **Domestic and tame** animals are superior to wild animals.



Transcendental Dualism

“It is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and the mind and the rational element over the passionate, is natural and expedient; whereas equality of the two or the rule of the inferior is always hurtful. The same holds good of animals in relation to men; for tame animals have a better nature than wild, and all tame animals are better off when they are ruled by man; for then they are preserved. Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind.”

--Aristotle, *Politics*



Puritanism:

Nature as dangerous chaos

Associated particularly with **early Protestant John Calvin** (1509-1564) and Puritanism.

- ❖ **A fallen world of nature:** when Adam fell from Grace, his world also fell – we lost the Garden of Eden.
- ❖ **Nature is chaotic**, disorderly, ever-changing without pattern or predictability, & thus no intelligible.
- ❖ Nature as fundamentally **dangerous**.
- ❖ We need either to **wall out** the wilderness, or conquer and **tame it** and turn it into a Garden based on human spiritual design and control.



The Enlightenment: Nature as Orderly & Useful

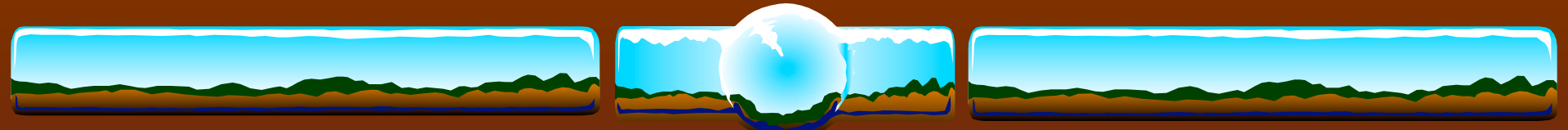
The “**Enlightenment**”: Particularly the 18th century, but continuing today.

- ❖ A response against medieval **faith**, “superstition,” religious wars, and witch hunts.
- ❖ Focus on **human world**
- ❖ **Optimistic** concerning knowledge (reason & science), society (movement toward democracy & human rights), material well being (allied with scientific and technological advances).



The Enlightenment and Nature

- ❖ **Nature is orderly**, acting according to natural “laws,” and works like a clock.
- ❖ We can **understand natural laws** through science and reason.
- ❖ Our scientific knowledge enables us to have **power over nature and manipulate it for our benefit** – the rational use of nature.
- ❖ “**Mechanism**”: treating nature as if it were a machine, lacking intrinsic value and almost as if it lacked life. (Animals as machines that don’t really suffer).



Romanticism: nature as sublime

Especially 1750-1870, but continuing today.

- ❖ In part a **reaction against** the rationalism and mechanism of the Enlightenment.
- ❖ **Nature has high value.** It is either a direct manifestation of spiritual reality, or has its own spiritual value.
- ❖ There is a **close correspondence** between the natural world and human nature.
- ❖ **Social vision:** simpler, pastoral lifestyles close to nature are superior to the nightmare of urban technology.



Romanticism

- ❖ **Reason is suspect.** The goal is not abstract knowledge but communion. Intuition, emotions, & the contemplation of beauty have particular value.
- ❖ **The arts** are particularly valued as a medium for representing the spiritual dimension of reality and expressing sensitive experience of it.
- ❖ The “**Sublime**” is prized: the awe-inspiring majesty of nature, which suggests its spiritual dimension and our place but our smallness within it.



Three Contemporary Views

1. “*Conservationism*” and the ideal of natural resource management
2. “*Preservationism*” and the wilderness ideal
3. “*Sense of Place*” and the bioregional ideal



“Conservationism”

- ❖ Not our general term of conserving nature, but a specific philosophy of **resource management**.
- ❖ Began in Europe in the eighteenth century, a form of the **Enlightenment’s rational search for order**, progress, and material well-being.
- ❖ Championed around 1900 in the U.S. by Gifford Pinchot, the “father of American forestry.”



Conservationism & resource management

- ❖ Goal is **using nature** for the benefit of both current and future human generations.
- ❖ “**Anthropocentric**”: nature’s value is only found in its use for us. By itself, it has no moral or spiritual value in itself.
- ❖ Nature is something to be controlled, managed, and consumed by humans. Nature unused by humans is a waste.
- ❖ This is the dominant view in government policy.



“Preservationism”

- ❖ Championed by **John Muir** (1838-1914), Wisconsin-born California nature writer.
- ❖ Proposed as an alternative to the anthropocentric conservationism of Pinchot.
- ❖ “**Biocentric**”: nature has intrinsic value. The ideal is to preserve nature as it is for its own sake.



Preservationism & wilderness

- ❖ The proper human “use” of nature is aesthetic and spiritual, which ideally **leaves nature undisturbed**.
- ❖ Basis of the “**wilderness**” ideal: truest nature is where humans have not shaped the natural world – human impact is negative, humans are essentially alien.



“Sense of Place”

- ❖ Ideal is to become a true “inhabitant.”
- ❖ This involves **knowing one’s place** intimately and extensively: native plants, seasonal patterns, the “feel” of a place.
- ❖ It involves cultivating a sense of **identity** with one’s place: you are a member of one’s place just as the birds and trees are.
- ❖ Basis for “**bioregionalism**” and much contemporary nature writing.



And Japan?

- ❖ Keep these in mind when we look at the views and values concerning nature in China and Japan.
- ❖ These views have some similarities to those in the West, but in many ways they are quite different.