



# Images of Nature: Introduction to the Special Issue

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## 1. Starting Point

This Special Issue on ‘Images of Nature’ in the *longue durée* has its origins in a historical conference on ‘Nature’ at the University of Geneva in the summer of 2022 (6th Swiss History Days, 29 June–1 July 2022). The suggestion to organize a panel there came from Sophie Ruppel, who recently published a detailed study on ‘botanophilia’ in bourgeois Enlightenment society. She vividly shows how European perceptions of nature changed in the 18th century and how the world of plants became an important field of popular education and occupation from about 1780 onward. Religious, scientific, and early ecological ideas contributed to these new practices. Around 1800, for example, people discussed a possible kinship among all living beings and even spoke of a ‘plant soul’. This raises fundamental questions about the human–nature relationship at the transition to modernity (Ruppel 2019).

Of course, we did not quite agree on how to frame and understand these phenomena. For many decades, there have been various proposals from various authors and disciplines—history, anthropology, philosophy, literary studies, and ecology—both in terms their disciplinary traditions and interdisciplinary combinations. The scholarly discussion has intensified in recent years, as was also obvious in Geneva. In order to gain more clarity on some issues in a pluralistic way, we decided to organize a call for papers after the conference and see what we could learn from the studies submitted. In this, we also received support from Simona Boscani Leoni, who has a lot of experience in the field (Boscani Leoni 2024) and who volunteered to be a co-guest editor.

When debates around a term seem so diverse and convoluted, it is useful to remember that terms rely on words and that these can have a specific starting point: *Natura* is a polysemic Latin noun that has accompanied the historical development of the West for centuries, spreading around much of the globe with colonialism and imperialism. It has been adopted or replicated in numerous languages, and it has taken on new meanings in different contexts over time and across regions. Our relationship with that abstract, fuzzy ‘nature’ has become a highly charged issue at least since the ecological turn around 1970. One reason for its politicization lies in the fact that it is not only about the human–environment relationship but also about the relationship of people to each other.

In our call for papers, we mentioned three factors affecting the long-term history of ‘Images of Nature’ that we would like to cover:

- The impact of *religion* since the Middle Ages: Christianity spread a peculiar view of nature, which was varied in many ways in theological debates; other faiths that were represented in the West could also be possible topics.
- The impact of *science* since the early modern period: Research in natural history has given an enormous boost to the imagery of nature since the 16th and 17th centuries, which continued and intensified during the Enlightenment and further on.
- The impact of *environmentalism* since decolonization: The increasing critique of Western society, religion, and science, brought a turn to ecology and, at the same time, to Indigenous peoples, who often functioned as postcolonial models.



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## 2. Authors and Topics

The papers submitted addressed all these points and were remarkably well distributed over time. The selection for this Special Issue can be presented in four chronological and thematic groups: late medieval/early modern scholarship; transition to modernity ('Sattelzeit'); western alternatives; and global outreach.

### 2.1. Late Medieval/Early Modern Scholarship

1. Camille Schneiter (*Changing Natures: On Theory and Practice of Breeding in the European Middle Ages*) mainly deals with Albertus Magnus' commentary about animals, which is based on Aristotle and written between 1256 and 1268. The paper suggests that various concepts usually attributed to the early modern period such as 'race' and 'ancestry' had their origin in late medieval times.

2. Karsten Engel (*Man as Image of Nature in Magnus Hundt: The Perspective of a Thomist ca. 1500*) explores a treatise on human dignity published in 1501 by the Leipzig scholar Magnus Hundt. The treatise pays special attention to the human body—not as a prison of the soul but as a perfectly balanced physical counterpart to it.

3. Gabriel Müller (*Daniel Sennert's Corpuscularian Reforms to Natural Philosophy*) shows how the well-known physician and professor Daniel Sennert, in his publications from 1619 on, inserted atomistic views into the anti-atomistic writings of Aristotle. This had serious consequences for the theoretical understanding of natural substances.

### 2.2. Transition to Modernity ('Sattelzeit')

4. Sophie Ruppel (*Nature as a Huge Organism: Gottfried Reinhold Treviranus (1776–1837) and Early Ecology in German Romantic Science*) portrays a founder of modern biology who turned away from earlier classification efforts in empirical research. His natural philosophy adapted traditional ideas and yet seems ecologically relevant today.

5. Joachim Eibach (*Naturmenschen? Alexander von Humboldt and Indigenous People*) uses a large corpus of Humboldt's writings to examine his views on Indigenous peoples. Unlike many contemporaries, the famous German naturalist was repeatedly reluctant to reproduce pejorative colonialist opinions and criticized them on occasion, based on personal experience.

### 2.3. Western Alternatives

6. Milo Probst (*A Political Ecology of the Body: Nature in French Anarchist Pedagogy around 1900*) shows that for anarchists around 1900, 'nature' was not stable, ahistorical, or preordained. Their political struggle and their pedagogy were directed toward saving human and nonhuman nature from its oppression by capitalism, religion, and the state.

7. Isabella Schlehaider (*'Apart from the Experiences of Subjects There Is Nothing, Nothing, Nothing, Bare Nothingness'—Nature and Subjectivity in Alfred North Whitehead*) presents the British process philosopher and his concept of subjectivity. In the 1920s and 1930s, he began to view subjectivity as part of nature, which was radically different from prevailing Western philosophies.

### 2.4. Global Outreach

8. Jon Mathieu (*How Great Was the 'Great Divide of Nature and Culture' in Europe? Philippe Descola's Argument under Scrutiny*) looks at the way the French anthropologist presents European history from the 16th to the 19th centuries in his global theory. With good reasons, he argues, one could also reverse the overall trend traced by Descola.

9. Regina M. Bichler (*Harm and Harmony—Concepts of Nature and Environmental Practice in Japan*) explores the Japanese 'love of nature', one of the country's hallmarks. She outlines and explains the discrepancies between discourse on nature and physical engagement with nature in the long run and with reference to Western impact, particularly from the 19th century on.

### 3. The Long-Term Perspective

While each article has its specific points and ideas, when read together, more aspects of nature imagery emerge. Some of these aspects are briefly presented here in free succession, along with some further notes, but with few additional references. The complete bibliographies are given in the articles.

#### 3.1. Languages

Accustomed to today's public discourse on nature, we often tend to forget that for a long time in history, 'nature' was a learned word used by only a fraction of the European population. It was small academic circles that exchanged ideas and inserted this ancient noun into Latin and later vernacular texts and gave it different meanings depending on the context. A revealing case of this inside story is the 1688 proposal by the British scholar Robert Boyle to eliminate the word from the vocabulary altogether or rigorously restrict its use and replace it with 'mechanism'. (Boyle 1688; Zedler 1740, column 1036) In the run-up to the French Revolution, 'nature' became politicized and gained broader appeal. But still around 1900, it seems to have been mostly an elite word that ordinary persons seldom verbalized—unless they needed a taboo word (learned from physicians) for sexual matters.<sup>1</sup> These questions of dissemination and popularization are still among the poorly studied topics that deserve more attention.

Well-documented translation processes can be helpful for this. How was the notion, for example, introduced in Japan? A Dutch–Japanese dictionary from 1796 rendered Dutch *natuur* as Japanese *shizen*. But effectively, there were many culturally specific expressions in the semantic horizon of *natuur* in pre-modern Japan. They are usually translated as 'mountains and waters', 'heaven and earth', 'something that is so given by heaven', 'vegetation growing in ten thousand forms', etc. The fact that *shizen* became the word connected to 'nature' may have been favored by its abstractness. It had been adapted centuries ago from Chinese with the meaning 'what is so of itself'. Until the 19th century, it denoted a universe consisting of humans and physical environments as equal, inseparable parts. With the connection to Western 'nature' becoming stabilized and increasingly important, however, *shizen* later turned into an opposite term relative to 'culture' and other human-related notions.<sup>2</sup>

#### 3.2. Traditions

The academic circles that dealt with 'nature' in Europe since the rise of population and towns in the Middle Ages were mainly composed of physicians and theologians. Although it is a random selection, the first group of articles gathered in this Special Issue gives a nice impression thereof. Schneiter begins in the 13th century with Albertus Magnus working on the recovered writings of Aristotle. Engel picks up the thread in the 1500s with a German scholar who uses Aristotle, Albertus Magnus, and his student Thomas Aquinas. Müller treats an early 17th-century scholar who stands in front of a similar ancestral gallery but finds a new twist under the broad umbrella of this tradition. These (exclusively male) specialists were scholastic natural philosophers working in the context of small universities, using books based on Aristotle and the Bible for teaching and research and viewing their study of nature as truth-producing science. (Schneiter 2023; Engel 2023; Müller 2023)

In our series of articles, the embedding of naturalists in Christian precepts ends at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. As Ruppel notes, God is not mentioned in the extensive writings of Gottfried Reinhold Treviranus (died 1837). Creation was replaced by nature, but the biologist used the old idea of a 'great chain of being': that is, nature as a vast network of interconnected life, powerful in pre-modern times and then often combined with theology. Treviranus instead supplemented it with the romantic idea of a 'vital force' behind all organisms. One can regard it as an example of the vitalistic current in late Enlightenment. (Ruppel 2023) While theology was only left aside by Treviranus, European anarchists, a hundred years later, saw it as a political enemy to be actively fought. Probst illustrates this on the example of French-speaking anarchist educators and schools. 'Returning to nature' for them meant promoting a self-regulated, holistic life, unmolested by the old clerical

repression—a new life in which freedom, equality, autonomy, and solidarity were inherent values (Probst 2023).

### 3.3. Dualisms

In the older European past, we find ‘nature’ in opposite relationships to a variety of notions: God, spirit, history, art, custom, etc. The dominant divisions were certainly produced by theology. Mankind was created in the image of God. In his son, he had himself become a man. Therefore, humans were the worthiest of all creatures. The cosmic hierarchy had several main levels: God the lord, then the human race, and finally the rest of creation. It was a pronounced anthropocentric vision that sharply divided the human and nonhuman spheres (Thomas 1983, pp. 17–50; Koselleck 1995, pp. 244–58; Engel 2023).

Today, we almost exclusively talk about nature and culture being opposed to each other. After all, the two words sound similar and trip off the tongue. But historically, this pair of opposites is young. We do not encounter it in the early modern period, if only because ‘culture’ as a general term was still emerging. As suggested by Mathieu, the trajectory of the nature–culture dualism was related to overarching power relations. In the age of high imperialism, it was a hegemonic weapon that placed the ‘cultured’, ‘civilized’ West above all others. In a second phase, with decolonization and Indigenous empowerment, it was turned against the hegemons. At present, the dualism is widely considered a handicap that should be overcome by uniting the two parts (Mathieu 2022).

The countertrend was certainly also fueled by dissenting, innovative voices in the West. When did it start? This question does not seem to have been studied systematically. Alfred North Whitehead in the interwar period was probably among the early but not the earliest exponents. Schlehaider shows how his non-anthropocentric, pluralistic concept of subjectivity radically dissolved the nature–culture dualism. Whitehead opposed what he called the ‘bifurcation of nature’ (Schlehaider 2023). This bifurcation, in a sense, had to be distilled from the past by himself. He identified it with the ‘new science’ of Newton and others in the late 17th century. One can suppose that the technical and scientific revolutions of Whitehead’s own lifetime supported his choice.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.4. Souls

Interesting clues to the complex field of hierarchical classifications are given by the notion of soul. The attribution of a soul resembled mostly a certificate of dignity. In pre-modern history, we encounter a fascinating variety of statements. In our sample of articles, the subject comes up several times. Magnus Hundt in 1501 put the body on a par with the soul and thus related to the divine sphere (Engel 2023). Daniel Sennert later spoke of ensouled atoms and of vegetative, sensitive, and rational souls for plants, animals and human beings, respectively (Müller 2023). In the 1630s, René Descartes pictured the bodies of humans and animals as machine-like automata. Only humans, however, possessed an immaterial soul. In modern times, he was often used as a key witness for Western dualisms. However, it is uncertain how many people shared his opinion, and for how long, in the 17th and 18th centuries (Müller 2023; Ruppel 2023; Mathieu 2022).

Of course, in the early modern period, there was also a discussion whether women, children, and Indigenous people were endowed with souls. Ironically, since the late 19th century, the Indigenous have been inundated with the Western soul, as the anthropological term ‘animism’ (from Latin *anima*, soul) made the rounds. Now, it was no longer primarily about their own endowment but about the way they viewed the world. Edward Tylor, one originator of the term, first wanted to speak of spiritualism, but he then saw that this could be confused with the European spiritualism of the period and decided on the transcultural use of ‘anima’ (Harvey 2005, p. 7). Anthropologists have been struggling with this transmission ever since. Like other concepts, animism has had its ups and downs in scholarly popularity. Sometimes the doubt runs right through a researcher’s biography. Philippe Descola, an important protagonist of the nature–culture debate, rejected the

concept in his thesis. Later, in his main work, he reconciled with it and expanded it further (Descola 1994, pp. 98–99; Descola 2013, pp. 129–43).

### 3.5. Symmetry in the Anthropocene

Among the key claims of recent scholarship in the humanities is the idea of ‘symmetry’: Symmetry on all sides—for the nature–society relationship, for the interaction with Indigenous peoples and nations, even for the connections between present and past (Arni 2018; Arni and Teuscher 2020). The call for symmetry is certainly justified and corresponds to an old ideal of academic balance. Balances can easily become tilted and need to be realigned frequently.

However, this cannot always be realized in the same way. In historical research, the source material plays a preeminent role, and it is often unbalanced. Historians can counteract this to a certain extent by focusing on weak voices. But in the case of voices that cannot be heard at all, any amplification is pointless—pure invention violates the rules of truth-seeking. In his article, Eibach is able to examine Alexander von Humboldt’s remarks about Indigenous people in a very fine, nuanced way because the German naturalist left so many texts, which are now also accessible in a digital corpus. His utterances can be compared to the loud contemporary Euro-American chorus with its unabashedly colonialist and racist slant. (Eibach 2023) But how should we know, in the sense of postcolonial symmetry, what Indigenous persons thought of Humboldt if there are almost no documents about it?

Is there also a symmetrical relationship between images of nature and environmental behavior? An interesting case in point is again Japan with its flourishing ‘love of nature’ expressed in a variety of culturally valued metaphors. Bichler shows in her long-term overview that practical environmental behavior evolved quite independently of them. Pollution and environmental damage were already evident in pre-modern Japan. In the late 19th century, they increased massively and soon reached critical levels through the introduction of modern technology from the West. It was not the adaptation to Euro-American images of nature in the first place that caused this unprecedented damage but the political goal of catching up with technology under the slogan ‘enriching the nation, strengthening the army’. The introduction of the nature–culture dualism with the new twist of the term *shizen* (mentioned at the beginning) can rather be seen as a parallel development or a by-product of this change (Bichler 2023).

The example can help us think about the general place of the studies in nature imagery. *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*—‘This is not a pipe’, the Belgium artist René Magritte famously wrote under the painting of an ordinary pipe in 1929. Up to the present day, many observers are puzzled when they see it for the first time. And even upon reflection, it is not that easy to pinpoint the relationships between the written sentence, the painted canvas, and the everyday object visible on it. Images are, and remain, a challenge for good scholarship.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> (Mathieu 2022, p. 545) mainly based on (Schweizerisches Idiotikon. Wörterbuch der schweizerdeutschen Sprache 1901, columns 845–50).
- <sup>2</sup> (Bichler 2023) based on (Marcon 2017, pp. 16–23) and other authors.
- <sup>3</sup> The early 20th century saw the formation of the new discipline of history of science, linked to the idea of progress and driven by technological and social developments (a key text is Sarton 1913); at the same time, there were various currents of cultural pessimism and anti-modernism among intellectuals.

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