

# HUMAN EMPIRE

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From Ancient Greece to the Christian era and from the Renaissance to the modern period, the main thrust of Western civilization has been to put nature at the service of humankind.

**T**HE VERY IDEA that we should be actively *concerned* about the way in which we treat the world around us is one that runs directly counter to the dominant traditions of Western thinking. Consider this brief survey of the history of Western attitudes toward the non-human world.

Let us begin with Ancient Greece. That's where we find the origins of the forms of philosophy, science, drama, poetry, sculpture, architecture, sport and democratic politics that have most informed the development of Western European civilization and its offshoots.

Western thinking, in particular, began in a form that is recognizable to us today with the emergence of the

first Greek philosophers in the sixth century BC. The explosion of Greek thinking that ran from Thales, the earliest known Greek philosopher, to Plotinus, the last great Greek philosopher of the pre-Christian period, is remarkable for its diversity. But what gave this thought its unity was the fact that these thinkers were the first to come to believe and more or less systematically explore the hypothesis that they lived in a *kosmos* — an *ordered* universe — which was potentially accessible to rational understanding. While this may now be a commonplace view, it was distinctive at the time.

Closely related to the view that we lived in an ordered universe was the suspicion that the universe must be

purposive. Intuitively, this suspicion was — indeed, still is — understandable enough. It seemed “obvious” that a rationally ordered world could not have just “fallen into place”, as it were. In contrast, the majority of today's scientists accept the far more counter-intuitive view that this *is*, in effect, precisely what has happened, and they provide powerful explanations for this in terms of quantum cosmology, natural selection and self-organizing systems.

The upshot of the Greek philosophers' teleological (i.e., goal-directed) conception of the universe was the view that things could be explained in terms of the purposes that they were presumed to serve. And for the most influential of the





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Greek philosophers — the great fifth- and fourth-century BC triumvirate of Socrates, his pupil Plato, and his pupil Aristotle — the ultimate end that things were presumed to serve was man (the sexist terminology being entirely apposite in this case — Greek society was extraordinarily male-dominated).

Socrates wrote nothing himself, but the essence of his views is conveyed in dialogues written by his students Xenophon and Plato. In Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Socrates explains that everything about humans has a purpose and that the gods have seen to it that everything in the non-human world — including other animals — is for the benefit of humans. We need not be surprised, then, that for Socrates and his most famous student, Plato, the non-human world is of marginal interest — if that! As Socrates remarks in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, "the people in the city have something to teach me, but the fields and trees won't teach me anything." (Now imagine if Charles Darwin had felt that way!)

PLATO'S STUDENT Aristotle formu-

lated his teleological views of the universe more explicitly than any other Greek philosopher. For Aristotle, the position of humans in the larger scheme of things was quite clear: "Plants exist for the sake of animals, and brute beasts [wild and domestic] for the sake of man . . . Since nature makes nothing purposeless or in vain, it is undeniably true that she has made all animals for the sake of man" (*The Politics*). Underpinning these views was the idea developed by Aristotle in *De Anima* that all living things could be ranked on a *scala naturae* — "a natural scale" — according to their degree of rationality. It seemed natural to Aristotle that those things that were lower on the scale existed for the purpose of serving those things that were higher on the scale. Indeed, this conception of the order of things was held to justify not only humans' use of the non-human world but also the institution of slavery (upon which Greek society depended). Aristotle held the view that slaves were not as rational as free men.

Greek-inspired thinking, and much of Greek culture in general, deeply informed the ideals of the

Romans as they became the dominant Mediterranean power, annexing Athens in the second century BC and Alexandria (by then the foremost centre of Greek scholarship) in the first century BC.

But this period of Greek-inspired thinking was to wane dramatically in the early fourth century AD when the Roman emperor Constantine moved his empire from a stance of periodically persecuting Christians to, first, toleration, and then active state endorsement of Christianity. This remarkable turn-around was hugely consequential, for it not only ushered Christianity into what was to become the Western European tradition, but it also led ultimately to the active suppression of all forms of pagan thought, which, of course, included Greek philosophy.

The Old Testament leaves us in no doubt as to where we stand in regard to the non-human world. The first chapter of Genesis enjoins us to "subdue" the Earth and to "have dominion over" all living things. The environmental historian Roderick Nash explains in *The Rights of Nature* — the main history of environmental ethics to date — that:

“Hebrew linguists have analyzed Genesis 1:28 and found two operative verbs: *kabash*, translated as ‘subdue’, and *radah*, rendered as ‘have dominion over’ or ‘rule’. Throughout the Old Testament *kabash* and *radah* are used to signify a violent assault or crushing. The image is that of a conqueror placing his foot on the neck of a defeated enemy, exerting absolute domination. Both Hebraic words are also used to identify the process of enslavement.”

Later on, God reinforces the point to Noah — after exterminating virtually all life on Earth in a flood! — when He tells Noah that “the fear of you and the dread of you” shall be upon all the Earth’s creatures — “into your hands they are delivered” (*Genesis* 9:2).

The New Testament record of Christ’s life does nothing to alter this general orientation. Thus, Saint Augustine points to the fact that Christ “sent the devils into a herd of swine and with a curse withered the tree on which he found no fruit” in order to urge the conclusion that “Christ himself shows that to refrain from the killing of animals and the destroying of plants is the height of superstition.”

Thomas Aquinas followed Aristotle — whom he referred to simply as “the Philosopher” — in arguing that “the order of things is such that the imperfect are for the perfect”, and thus that plants exist for the sake of animals and plants and animals for the sake of humans.

THE MIDDLE AGES came to an end with the Italian Renaissance of the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. This period was marked by the rediscovery of, and rebirth — hence, “renaissance” — of interest in, classical Roman culture and, by virtue of that, classical Greek culture. In conjunction with this, the Renaissance was also marked by a shift in emphasis from a focus on God to a relatively greater focus on humanity. Perhaps the single most famous manifesto of this spirit was Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s “Oration on the Dignity of Man”. The whole thrust of Pico’s exuberant oration is that God has made humans and humans alone such that there are no fixed limits to our nature and, hence, we can ordain our own limits

and shape ourselves in whatever ways we prefer. This was a distinctly modern orientation and really marks the beginning of the modern period.

Whereas the Greek and Christian world-views considered that the world is *already* made for us, this new, modern spirit was suggesting the more active view that we could *make* the world for us. Shaping ourselves in whatever ways we prefer could mean developing the power to shape the world around us in whatever ways we liked. This was exactly the spirit that informed the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that followed in the wake of the Renaissance. The leading spokesmen for this revolution were the Englishman Francis Bacon and the Frenchman René Descartes.

Declaring that “knowledge is power”, Bacon urged the development of the new science upon his contemporaries as a way of “enlarging the bounds of Human Empire”. Descartes, widely regarded as “the father of modern philosophy”, saw non-human animals as nothing more than complex machines and considered that the new science would render us “the masters and possessors of nature”.

The view that we should actively seek to obtain mastery over nature in order to enlarge the bounds of the “Human Empire” represents the dominant Western attitude to the non-human world from the time of Bacon and Descartes until at least the last quarter of a century. This attitude both shaped and was shaped by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment’s dreams of universal human progress and by the technologically driven industrial revolution of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. And in our own century this has been the overwhelmingly dominant attitude toward the non-human world. Sigmund Freud spoke graphically for this attitude when he wrote in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930):

“Against the dreaded external world one can only defend oneself by some kind of turning away from it, if one is to solve the task by oneself. There is, indeed, another and better path: that of becoming a member of the human community and with the help of a technique guided by science, going over to the attack against nature and subjecting her to human will. Then

one is working with all for the good of all.”

THEORETICALLY, WE NOW live in a post-Darwinian, post-Big-Bang age, in which we understand that this planet Earth represents the cradle of our evolution and our cosmic home in the inconceivable vastness of space. We now understand that humanity is a non-intended — but none the less remarkable for that — outcome of the unfolding of the cosmos; that we are in no sense the pre-ordained or “rightful” lords and masters of the universe; and that our earthly tenure, like that of all other species, is anything but eternal.

Many of the discontents of civilization, both material and spiritual, are and will continue to be bound up in precisely the attitude that Freud endorses — an attitude that can be traced right back through the modern period, the Christian period, and the classical foundations of Western culture.

Yet, as readers of *Resurgence* would know, these (historically very recent) ideas have not yet sunk deeply enough into nearly enough hearts and minds around the planet. Indeed, in the face of the simply massive historical legacy that we have briefly considered here, it can seem quite reasonable to endorse the following stark conclusion drawn by H. G. Wells, a visionary contemporary of Freud, in his 1920 book *The Outline of History*: “Human history”, said Wells, “becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.”

Well, if that’s the choice — and it probably does come down to something like that in general terms — then I vote for education! And as an antidote to the temptation of despair offered by the “catastrophe option” (you know, the “It’s all stuffed anyway” sort of attitude) let us count our present blessings — like such everyday miracles as *Resurgence* and Schumacher College, which stand in the vanguard of the education option. Take heart: since when was the future *ever* a linear projection of the past? ●

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