PREFACE

AKEEL BILGRAMI

Some years ago, I had given a lecture in Istanbul, asking the question, how and when did the concept of nature get transformed into the concept of natural resources? The lecture was partly genealogical (tracing the transformation to historical changes, in political economy, in theology, and in the rise of institutions such as the Royal Society in England) and partly analytical (expounding the evacuation of *value* properties from our understanding of nature as a result of an outlook that had emerged around the new science of the seventeenth century, which equated nature exhaustively with the properties that the natural sciences study).

After the lecture, Heini Thyssen, who was in the audience and whom I had not met before, asked if I thought this question could be explored in further detail in some sort of research project. He himself had very interesting ideas of his own on the subject, which he put to me in a long boat ride we took that afternoon, in particular whether this transformation I was exploring generated a kind of unpaid, even unacknowledged, *debt* that we owed to nature; and he was curious about whether the whole question of debt in political economy might have a broader canvas—to include a debt of this kind not just in our relations with one another but in our relations with nature as well. This immediately struck me as much more than a promising analogy since part of the transformation I was keen to stress was that though we have always taken from nature, in all social worlds prior to the modern period there were rituals to show attitudes of respect and restorative return to nature before cycles of planting and even hunting. It's only in the last three hundred years or so that we have come to think that we might take from nature *with impunity*.

Mr. Thyssen encouraged me to propose an ongoing research project with scholars and public intellectuals meeting once a year to discuss these issues and see through to their significance for ecology, for politics and political economy, and in general for how our sensibilities may be shaped to be *ethically* responsive to growing concerns about our relations to nature. So about five years ago, I sent the NOMIS Foundation a three-year project proposal under the overarching title “Nature and Value.” I invited people from a wide range of disciplines and interests to join us and to bring their distinct and diverse angles to this theme: geologists, climate scientists, philosophers, literary critics, sociologists, political scientists, economists, an art historian, a couple of activists, and one of the great public intellectuals of our time, the late Jonathan Schell.

We met three times over roughly three years in London—for two packed days of conversation on each occasion. The format differed from year to year, sometimes taking the form of freestanding papers presented by the participants, sometimes taking the form of a commentator presenting each paper by some author, with the author responding. Intense discussions followed each presentation. These were altogether worthwhile occasions—serious, instructive, learned, and throughout raising issues of the most fundamental importance and concern, and often reaching to depths well below the conventional thoughts available on the surface. The depth and originality of these writings would not by itself have warranted the publication of these essays, if there wasn’t also an integrity to them, by which I mean a close integration not just of themes but of points of view and conclusions. It is rare to find scholars coming together on a systematic study of a topic, each from their diverse disciplinary location, and converging on a broadly unified standpoint on it. If I were asked to say in terms of the highest generality—abstracting from the wealth of detail in these essays—what that topic and what that standpoint is, I could do no better than to say that it is the wider significance of the concept of nature such that a proper understanding of that significance reaches all the way to an ethical and political position. It is not this topic and standpoint that are novel. It has surfaced recurrently in intellectual history for two thousand years (Romanticism in Germany and England, for example, is only a late occurrence of it). What is novel is how such widely situated thinkers can come to a position of overlapping consensus on it, each presenting quite distinct, though fascinatingly related and entirely coherent, considerations for embracing the consensus.

The volume begins with two short pieces by the late Jonathan Schell, author of that rightly celebrated classic on the destructive power of nuclear weapons, *The Fate of the Earth* (Stanford University Press, 1982). It is tempting to think that a major difference between the nuclear danger and the threat of climate change is one of public knowledge. Hiroshima and Nagasaki spectacularly awakened the world’s public to the former but there has been no counterpart to make vivid the latter. We may feel hotter over summers, we may witness increasingly

destructive storms and the rise of tides, but these remain in many sections of the public mind mere spikes in the natural course of things; they do not yet match the decisive knowledge of a devastation of the sort that was conveyed by what the United States visited upon Japan with the atom bomb. Corporations can continue to undermine the climate scientists' alarm bells by expending minor fortunes to propagandize against climate change "alarmists," and right-wing populist leaders can still successfully serve these corporate efforts. But after Hiroshima and Nagasaki no manipulative efforts of this sort can hide what the atom bomb (and its successor) can wreak. Climate science is still relatively esoteric knowledge and the experts who possess it have simply not yet reached the public mind with the same directness and display. Schell's short essays here are a good corrective to the temptation of believing in such a differential. He is particularly well situated to do so since, over a remarkable life of study, he has written on both crises with enormous concern and care. What is more, it would seem, from what he says, that the nuclear potential might in fact be more within our powers to constrain than the inexorable path that the earth and its atmosphere are now set on. As he says, if we survive the nuclear threat as a species it is not at all clear that we will be able to shrink our own power down to the point where we can reverse the effects of climate change. The reason for this is that we have the scientific knowledge whose application has made us so systematically destructive of nature and once we are possessed of such knowledge we are, just by its possession, *predisposed* to go on a path from which there is no turning back. In other words, we have all sorts of strengths that come with the knowledges we possess but what we lack, paradoxically, is precisely, in this respect of knowledge, the one strength we need, "the strength to make ourselves weak."

Schell's presence in our discussions was inspiring. His two brief contributions are from notes for a lecture and from an introduction to a long work on which he was embarked when he died. As editor, I have not indulged in the impertinence of revising them to fit the canonical format for an academic paper suited for a volume of this kind. Though the first is, just in one or two places, impressionistic as notes to oneself can be, and the second, again in just one or two places, promissory in tone as introductions to longer works can be, there is no obscurity in them that needs removing or improving by an editorial hand. They are highly readable and a real pleasure to read for their eloquence and their great insight. They are published here by the kind permission of his widow, Irena Gross.

In these writings, Schell mentions and comments on the excellent motivations for (as well as some of the shortcomings of) the demand for a shift in nomenclature recently sought by geologists for how to describe our present era—no longer the "Holocene," but the "Anthropocene"—to mark the scarcely credible fact that human beings have, by the application of the knowledges we

possess, not only made myriad artifacts over the centuries but indeed *converted the earth we inhabit itself into an artifice of our making*. This grand and radical idea of the “Anthropocene” is expounded and discussed in detail by the two essays and one comment that follow immediately after Schell in the volume.

The eminent geologist Jan Zalasiewicz is a major figure in the forefront of the stratigraphic campaign for this name change. His contribution in two of our meetings was invaluable tutorials, not just regarding the motivations for the marking out of a new era for the earth, but to relate it, first, to global warming and, then, to ask the vital question of when to draw the boundary that separates this era from the previous one. This last question is scrupulously addressed by him in the second of his two essays here—as is the tantalizing question about how to relate the perspective of the geologist, which is concerned in general to place the blame (if that is the right word) on the causal efficacies of humanity as a collective actor, to the perspective of the social scientist whose instinct is to blame more specific “groups of humans (rich ones, in developed countries), who drive the process more acutely than others (impoverished communities in developing countries).”

Kyle Nichols, another geologist, and Bina Gogineni, a literary critic and theorist, take up both these questions in detail and draw important lessons for the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to this last question, with some aptly formulated anxiety about how things have gone when the perspective of the humanities in particular was left out of the ongoing efforts to grasp the Anthropocene; and, in his comment, Nikolas Kompridis takes their argument further in a more explicitly philosophical vein raising questions about the divergent “temporalities” that different disciplinary analysts have focused on, as well as different conceptions of the “epistemic authority” that are reflected in each disciplinary perspective. In a separate contribution he adds a considered argument for how to understand the relations human beings bear to the nonhuman, an argument in which the notion of agency is central, repudiating a familiar picture owing to Bruno Latour and others on how human agency must be conceived in the first place.

Philosophy (as well as intellectual history) is the disciplinary focus of Akeel Bilgrami’s, Sanjay Reddy’s, and Joanna Picciotto’s interest in the subject of nature in the wake of our current ecological concerns.

Bilgrami explores how it is that as a result of the desacralization of nature in the transformations that Weber described with his term *disenchantment*, a quite illicit extrapolation was made that evacuated nature of all *value* properties as well, even though these value properties were not conceived as getting their grounding in a divine or sacral source. He then proceeds to draw a politics out of what he describes as a “secular enchantment” of the world that still remains possible, one that if deeply explored could radically reconfigure our

political ideals, fundamentally altering our understanding of the relations between liberty and equality so as to line them up with an ideal of the “unalienated life” that went missing with the transformation of the concept of nature into the concept of natural resources. These explorations are done via a critique of John Locke’s contractualist arguments for privatization of the commons and more recent game-theoretic consolidations of Locke. After a superbly comprehending comment on these ideas, Sanjay Reddy, a capacious minded economist, writes a sympathetic supplement to Bilgrami while at the same time raising a question for him that suggests new directions of work.

Joanna Picciotto focuses on roughly the same period of intellectual history but takes things in a different direction. Making a distinction between value and meaning, she looks with learning at the literature of “physico-theology” to uncover how, in this very time, sentient nonhuman creatures more generally came to be included in a more accommodating conception of the relations that hold between the inhabitants of nature, a measurable advance in the abilities of human beings to widen their ethical and political horizons. Picciotto’s paper is a sharp revision of the intellectual history to which Bilgrami appeals and deepens our understanding of the early modern period’s relevance to our current concerns about morals and nature.

For some (Naomi Klein, for instance) it has become an article of faith that there is no *sufficient* way to address the crisis of climate change without politically addressing the tendencies of capital, quite possibly to the point of bringing about a terminus of capitalism as we know it. While taking no stand on that point, Robert Pollin’s essay is a careful and rigorous plea by a radical political economist that, at least in the case of the United States, a great deal can be done to control carbon emissions *within* the commitment to growth that is so central to capitalist economic formations. His blueprint for “green growth” as a path to climate stabilization is a document well worth studying for the prospects it holds out for a saner political economy.

The political economy angle in Pollin is linked to a legal perspective in Jedediah Purdy’s essay. It incorporates economic questions regarding nature’s resources not only with the law in general, but with environment law in particular, understood in the context of what he calls “infrastructure,” a systemic notion that has consequences for the political ideals that were discussed in the earlier papers in the volume. Purdy reveals the extent to which the law, so understood, can lead to two things: forms of coordination that underlie the social cooperation needed to constrain our exploitation of nature, as well as the achievement of the distributive goals that we seek. It thus gives an institutional grounding for points made more abstractly in other papers up to this point about the relationship between our ideals of liberty and equality and the ideal of overcoming our alienation (from nature and from one another).

James Tully's two offerings continue the twin themes of this book (nature and value) by looking to how ecological issues are inseparable from the social issues of alienation, inequalities, and individualistic, competitive ideals of political economy and social life. The first of them explicitly combines the projects of Schell and Bilgrami in diagnosing modernity's undermining of ecosystems via the alienated disengagement from the participatory stance with others and with nature. He then develops extraordinarily ambitious ideas about what is entailed by the overcoming of alienation. There are a penetrating account of alienated responses to the environmental crisis and a sensitive presentation of an alternative form of response, deriving from a very wide range of scholarly sources, including indigenous traditions of thought and the anthropology of "gift"-giving traditions within which nature itself, in the form of the Earth, may be conceived of as an overarching gift in our grateful possession. Essential to this alternative form of responding to our crisis is a subject that recurs throughout this volume: how to integrate ethics with cognition. As Tully puts it, bridging the gap between "knowing the good" and "being good." If a stance of disengagement was a primary source of alienation in the modern period, what would reengagement even so much as look like after human relations (to nature, to one another) have been so deeply defined by such a disengagement? His second essay turns to answering this question in abundant detail. It is a vital contribution to our current crisis of "nature and value."

Anthony Laden's paper discusses the "gift of nature" conception and offers a notion of agency that is in keeping with what is needed to retain the gift with no other goal than sustainability of the *system* with which we are gifted. This amounts to an eschewal of productive goals not only in our political economy but in the very notion of agency and action. Agency, on this account, is open-ended, without a terminus in "ends" that would count as the achievement of a goal. "Keep things going" is the point of agency—as in a conversation—and it underlies the ideal of keeping nature going in the form of the preservation of a gift. In her comment, Carol Rovane gives a sympathetic exposition and yet critical response to Laden's essay, in which she first covers the rich conceptual terrain of his essay (relating the discussion of nature to social tradition, moral realism, and cultural relativism) and then suggests a different direction for the notion of agency, one that requires conceiving of groups as agents (or "persons") and which may provide yet another basis for the collective action problem of the environmental commons that was discussed in earlier papers.

The literary critic David Bromwich seeks inspiration in Wordsworth and Hans Jonas for a view of human nature as continuous with physical nature without the transcendent elevated status that we have come to give it in our familiar contrasts between nature and culture or natural tendency and moral commitment. The poet's term *natural piety*, intended to mark conscience as the exercise of a *second* nature rather than ethic's gratuitously metaphysical

“noumenal” surpassing of nature’s constraints, is expounded with a close reading of a range of poems. The essay’s argument makes possible that we may see our moral natures as both natural and at the same time irreducible, unlike, for instance, as in Freud, where conscience is sometimes reductively presented as a second-order natural drive intended to curb our destructive first-order drives. This irreducibility of the normative to the natural, even as the human nature from which the normative emerges is continuous with physical nature, is a philosophical outcome that perhaps only a literary exploration of this kind could reveal.

There is a great deal being written on nature these days, as a result of the environmental crisis that confronts us, but it is really very unusual to have in one place such a wide range of approaches to the topic of nature and our failures with regard to it—approaches coming, as I said, from geology and climate science, economics, the law, political science, literature, philosophy, and intellectual history. It is more unusual yet to find writings prompted by the crisis refusing the tendency to see the ecological as a self-standing theme of concern, one that sequesters it from the larger questions of alienation, liberty, and equality. But, above all, I will say once again as I close this much too brief and breathless survey, it is almost unique to find such diverse approaches all converging on a more or less unified and coherent response to these failures with a mutual sympathy for one another’s arguments, frequently building on the ideas of one another, even as they register disagreements and points of departure. Questions about nature have long needed this range of regard and this convergence of conviction and it has been immensely gratifying to summon the work of such fine and distinguished scholars to these ends.