

# HUMAN (AND) NATURE: Using Arendt to Reconcile Models of Environmental Ethics

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## INTRODUCTION

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt implicitly oscillates between two paradigms that relate the human to nature. Though she neither acknowledges the presence of multiple paradigms nor their apparent contradiction, she alternatively depicts man as part of, and separate from, nature. While these two depictions seem necessarily to conflict, Arendt finds both equally viable and essential to her project. This paper attempts to use the coexistence of these two man-nature paradigms in *The Human Condition* as a model to reconcile a similar tension between two useful—but equally contradictory—man-nature paradigms in Christian environmental ethics.

## BACKGROUND

Many scholars of environmental philosophy have previously written on the unique manner in which Arendt understands the relationship between man and nature. Paul Ott holds that Arendt subscribes to a nature-culture dualism, which, he argues, allows humans to honestly acknowledge the inherent opposition between man and nature and to begin to seek a balance between the two (though this author argues that he underestimates the moments of nature-culture monism in Arendt's work).<sup>1</sup> Anne Chapman takes Arendt's earth-world and natural-human dichotomies at face

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ott, "World and Earth: Hannah Arendt and the Human Relationship to Nature," *Ethics, Place & Environment* 12.1 (2009): 1-16.

value and derives an ethics of environmentalism from them.<sup>2</sup> Peter Cannavò, noting moments where Arendt imbues nature with dignity and meaning, extends her wish for the durability of different environments to include the most natural aspects of the human artifice.<sup>3</sup> Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves identifies similar tension between the role of nature in Arendt's critiques of modernity, though he does not extend the tension to her conception of humans in general.<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite all of these examples and the knowledge of this author, Arendt has never been used specifically to analyze theological models of environmental protection.

## ARENDR'S NATURE-MAN PARADIGM

In one paradigm in *The Human Condition*, Arendt portrays man as inherently part of nature. She calls the earth “the very quintessence of the human condition” and men “the children of nature.”<sup>5</sup> The status of man as natural is neither an unhappy accident nor something to overcome, since Arendt bemoans the idea of humans forgetting or leaving nature all together. Her anxiety over modern man's growing alienation from nature frames the book, which in turn, also frames this essay insofar as it uses her understanding of man's relationship with nature as the *natural man* paradigm.

While adhering to the *natural man* paradigm, Arendt cites several ways in which modern man has erroneously convinced himself that he is a distinct and separate entity from nature. For instance, with the development of more abstract fields of mathematics, man prefers to think of natural concepts in the theoretical plane—as if they are something man can only grasp with his mind. As a result, man sees the earth as a third party observer, “from a universal, astrophysical viewpoint, a cosmic standpoint **outside nature itself**.”<sup>6</sup> He believes he holds the same relationship to the earth as anything else in the cosmos, never acknowledging the special relationship that he possesses with it as a species—amongst many—that depends on the earth for its existence. She has similar concerns about the development of modern science, of which “earth alienation became and has remained [its] hallmark” as it became more mathematically-based.<sup>7</sup> She worries that “the modern *reductio scientiae ad mathematicam* has overruled the testimony of nature as witnessed at close range by human senses.”<sup>8</sup> That is, science has the same problem as math: it ceased to be a tool to understand what we learn about nature sensually, and has instead become more authoritative about reality than actual nature. Not only does Arendt reject this

2 Anne Chapman, “The Ways That Nature Matters: The World and the Earth in the Thought of Hannah Arendt,” *Environmental Values* 16, no. 4 (2007): 433-445.

3 Peter F. Cannavò, “Hannah Arendt: Place, World, and Earthly Nature,” in *Engaging Nature: Environmentalism and the Political Theory Canon*, ed. Peter F. Cannavò, (Cambridge: MIT, 2014), 253-269.

4 Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt*, London; New York: Routledge, 1994.

5 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2018), 2.

6 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 265, emphasis mine.

7 Ibid, Pg. 264.

8 Ibid, Pg. 267.

view since man can “observ[e] natural phenomena as they were given to him,”<sup>9</sup> but she also concludes that man sees nature firsthand through his senses because he is inextricably in and of it.

The legacy of the Age of Exploration merely compounded these effects further, since mapping the earth made it seem smaller—literally removed man from it—since much of cartography’s poetic propriety takes place in the air.

“The fact that the decisive shrinkage of the earth was the consequence of the invention of the airplane, that is, of leaving the surface of the earth altogether, is like a symbol for the general phenomenon that any decrease of terrestrial distance can be won only at the price of putting a decisive distance between man and earth, of alienating man from his immediate earthly surroundings.”<sup>10</sup>

By mapping the corners of the globe, man set up a dichotomous relationship wherein he was the actor and the earth the acted-upon. Moreover, once he finished, rather than realizing how dwarfed he was by its stature, the earth instead became small to him since by man’s own hand he could now see the whole structure at once. It no longer seemed like all-encompassing environment; thereby, leading humans to once again think of the earth from a third-person perspective.

Arendt cites a few examples to demonstrate that this earthly alienation has generally saturated modern humans’—not just scientists’ and explorers’—view of their nature, referring to two particular ways in which these “earth-bound creatures ... have begun to act as though [they] were dwellers of the universe.”<sup>11</sup> First, one can see the results of man no longer believing he is of the earth through what he says about space travel. Humans reacted to the successful launch of Sputnik as if it were the first step toward a jailbreak, referring to their continued existence on the earth as “imprisonment.”<sup>12</sup> The sentiment that mankind is somehow temporarily “bound to the earth” until it can happily free itself reveals man’s entirely new understanding of his place in the universe.<sup>13</sup>

The second piece of evidence that Arendt cites alludes to man’s desire to make humans ‘not of nature’ in the literal sense, referring to the role of bioengineering in order to create life through eugenics, in vitro fertilization and gene editing. Man would not want to do this if he did not already believe that he was not of nature; he is simply making it literal. She specifically states that the “desire to escape from imprisonment to the earth” shares a motivation with the desire to mix ‘frozen germ plasm from people of demonstrated ability under the microscope to produce superior

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9 Ibid, Pg. 265.

10 Ibid, Pg. 251.

11 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 3.

12 Ibid, Pg. 1.

13 Ibid, Pg. 2.

human beings,' and 'to alter [their] size shape and function.'"14 Yet, it is important to take note that Arendt objects to any form of man playing God when it comes to the process of humans 'entering the world' because she believes it essential that man remain a part of nature.

Arendt's reason for periodically championing an understanding of man as a part of nature and at other times lamenting his loss of that understanding—remains in her view of humankind—as ultimately inseparable from the earth. She writes that, "earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice."<sup>15</sup> Despite what they might believe, humans are not dwellers of the universe, and the fact remains that they need the earth to survive. It is not clear whether maintaining earthly nature would remain important if, for example, another planet was found with an environment similar to earth's, but as for now, this planet remains irreplaceable.

### THE *OPPOSITIONAL* MAN PARADIGM

And yet, the idea that the earth's environment is irreplaceable appears to be contradicted elsewhere in the text. In another passage, Arendt states that artificial environments are just as good, if not better. When discussing the creation of the artificial human realm, she says:

"In addition to the conditions under which life is given to man on earth, and partly out of them, men constantly create their own, self-made conditions, which, their human origin and their variability notwithstanding, possess the same conditioning power as natural things"<sup>16</sup>

If that is the case, it begs the question of what would be the problem with living in an entirely artificial environment? If humans could survive in a biodome on another planet, it would not just have the capacity to shape the human condition, it would have the exact same conditioning power as the earth does now. Man, then, should be able to exist independently of nature and should be understood as such.

In fact, there are many passages in *The Human Condition* that imply a man-nature dichotomy. In this second Arendtian paradigm, man is inherently separate from, in opposition with—and most importantly—dominant over nature. The problem with modernity in this paradigm is not that humans are too artificial, but that they are too natural. Especially in Arendt's labor-work-action model, the very definition of 'human' depends upon distinguishing it from 'natural.' The remainder of this essay

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14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9, emphasis mine.

will refer to this understanding of man's relationship with nature as the *oppositional man* paradigm.

While subscribing to the *oppositional man* paradigm, a 'natural man' becomes a contradiction in terms throughout her discussion of labor since Arendt defines it as the "the most natural and least worldly<sup>17</sup> of man's activities" because it does not lastingly convert nature into anything.<sup>18</sup> Its products are consumed and disposed of, but nature's metabolic process remains unaltered. Meanwhile, a person primarily occupied with labor she terms an *animal laborans*, which means "only one, at best the highest, of the animal species which populate the earth."<sup>19</sup> Putting these facts together, if one is primarily engaged in a natural activity as opposed to worldly activities, one does not even fit the definition of human—one is an animal.

Humans, by contrast, are engaged in work and action, both of which imply some degree of artificiality. Work "provides an 'artificial' world of things, distinctly different from all-natural surroundings,"<sup>20</sup> as it is the process of converting nature into something durably useful to humans. It is particularly concerned with creating the public realm, which Arendt specifically says "is not identical with the earth or with nature."<sup>21</sup> It is only in the public realm—not in nature—that action can take place, and only outside nature, then, that man can exist *qua* man since a life without speech or action "has ceased to be a human life."<sup>22</sup> Bearing this in mind, the 'human' cannot be fully defined with reference only to nature as there must be some reference to the artificial in order to fill out properly the requirements. In a mock Venn diagram, the circle labeled 'humans' is not contained within the circle labeled 'nature' as would be the case in the *natural man* paradigm.

Moreover, the language Arendt uses to depict the relationship between man and nature at times implies not just separation, but also open antagonism. Arendt describes the process of converting nature into something artificial as always having an element of "violation and violence."<sup>23</sup> *Homo faber*, a human employed with work or action,<sup>24</sup> apparently does not just act in a realm separate from nature, but "conducts himself as lord and master of the whole earth," unlike the not-fully-human *animal laborans* who is a servant to it.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, *homo faber* "has always been a destroyer of nature,"<sup>26</sup> since to be fully human, man cannot simply be in charge of nature—which he could do as part of nature—he must 'attack' it. But nature does not remain passive

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17 Note that 'worldly' to Arendt, is the opposite of 'earthly,' parallel to the dichotomy of 'artificial' and 'natural.' It generally means 'pertaining to the human artifice created by work.'

18 *Ibid.*, Pg. 101.

19 *Ibid.*, Pg. 84.

20 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

21 *Ibid.*, Pg. 52.

22 *Ibid.*, Pg. 176.

23 *Ibid.*, Pg. 139.

24 *Ibid.*, Pg. 136.

25 *Ibid.*, Pg. 139.

26 *Ibid.*

in the face of this ‘attack,’ for it “forever invades the human artifice, threatening the durability of the world and its fitness for human use.”<sup>27</sup>

Rather than simply relieve humans of the above-described problems modernity poses in the *natural man* paradigm, while adhering to the *oppositional man* paradigm, Arendt identifies a completely different problem with the modern period. Seemingly contradicting her initial concerns with modern science and its ilk, in the *oppositional man* paradigm modern humans have almost become too natural. They are not distinct enough from nature since everyone is an *animal laborans* who “acquiesce[s] in a dazed, ‘tranquilized,’ functional type of behavior.”<sup>28</sup> These jobholders do not ‘act’ in the Arendtian sense, and they—like animals—do not use action to distinguish themselves from each other, but rather, to “abandon [their] individuality.”<sup>29</sup> Modern human society, then, is a society of animals based upon this framework.

### THE STEWARDSHIP MODEL AND *OPPOSITIONAL MAN*

The above-described contradictions between the two modes of thought contained in *The Human Condition* mirror the conflict between two theological models of ecological responsibility vying for dominance. It might seem inappropriate to draw from Arendt to attempt to solve a theological debate, yet *The Human Condition* does not reject theism, but only insists that it address questions whose answers would not be affected by the existence of a god. Arendt distinguishes between ‘the human condition’ and ‘human nature’ as the latter would presuppose a human purpose, and therefore, a creator. She only makes claims about the former, which concerns the condition in which humans happen to find themselves, given that they do exist.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, while the discussion that follows concerns models that are theologically derived, the academic debate over them concerns which one is the more practically effective in addressing the ongoing ecological crisis (the theological justification of each is not typically challenged). Taking aside the question of whether each model is valid from a theological standpoint and considering only their relative efficacies, Arendt’s work is as appropriate as anyone else’s in considering what to do with these two seemingly contradictory positions.

The first and more traditional theological model is less antagonistic than Arendt’s *oppositional man* paradigm, but shares with it a view of man as a third-party dominant over nature. Based in *The Book of Genesis*, the stewardship model holds that humans should protect nature because it was given as a service to them by God. It is in their best interest for nature to thrive, and as a check to humanity’s shortsightedness, the model holds that humans have dominion over nature but not over God since their wills are subordinate to His for the earth.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, Pg. 100.

<sup>28</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 322.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, Pg. 10-11.

Pope John Paul II articulates the stewardship model best, as it pertains to environmental protection, in the papal encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. He affirms man's reign over nature, claiming that man is "superior to the other creatures placed by God under his dominion," but reminds his church that "man must remain subject to the will of God."<sup>31</sup> That is, having dominion over the earth does not mean that humans can do whatever they please. They must consider the divine will, which, presumably, desires the preservation of nature so that it may continue to benefit the future generations to come. Accordingly, "development cannot consist only in the use, dominion over and indiscriminate possession of created things and the products of human industry" but rather man must remember that he is created in God's likeness.<sup>32</sup> He must have the same concern for what is in his dominion as God has for what is in God's—humankind.

Many have criticized this model because the human obligation to protect the environment is derived from humankind's role as nature's divinely appointed (yet anthropocentric and paternalistic) caretakers, but not due to any special dignity that nature has in and of itself.<sup>33</sup> Even if humans were the perfect stewards—and they certainly are not—some argue that viewing nature as subordinate to and in service of humanity inevitably leads humans to exploit it.<sup>34</sup> There is no obligation in this model to protect nature in ways that are not eventually useful to man, because nature's value is a consequence of its service to man, leading many environmentalists to prefer a model that views nature as valuable in its own right.

## COMPANIONSHIP MODEL AND NATURAL MAN

Another theological model that satisfies this desire—the companionship model—echoes Arendt's *natural man* paradigm in that it takes man as existing within nature as one part of it. Pope Francis can be understood to be speaking from this viewpoint in the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, wherein he criticizes human development of technology "according to an *undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm*."<sup>35</sup> He states that,

"This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation."<sup>36</sup>

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31 John Paul II, Encyclical on the Social Concern *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (30 Dec. 1987) §29, at The Holy See, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_)

32 *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §29

33 Robin Attfield, "Environmental Sensitivity and Critiques of Stewardship," in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, ed. Berry, R. J. (London: T&T Clark, 2006). 76.

34 Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993). 107.

35 Francis I, Encyclical on Care for Our Common Home *Laudato Si'* (24 May 2015) §106, at The Holy See, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_Enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_Enciclica-laudato-si.html)

36 *Laudato Si'*, §106.

This argument is strikingly similar to Arendt's. Pope Francis also worries that modern science makes one falsely believe that nature is something one can grasp and act upon as a third party, expressing concern at believing "empirical science provides a complete explanation of life, the interplay of all creatures and the whole of reality," rather than bypassing nature in its quest for the truth about reality.<sup>37</sup> He would have mankind remember that it exists *within* nature.

Michael and Kenneth Himes articulate their version of this model—which they call a companionship model—in their book *Fullness of Faith*. They also reference Genesis as their biblical source but point instead to the creation of Eve as evidence that man was created to exist in relationality to nature; that is to say, not in complete isolation. Seeing as how God loves all of creation, it is not just other humans that are worthy of being related to; nature is an end in and of itself that is loved by God. Therefore, humans should not consider nature as an 'it' to be acted upon, but rather, they should consider themselves as a part of nature and in mutual companionship with all of its creatures.<sup>38</sup> Humans should protect the environment not out of self-interest, but out of love for creatures as ends within themselves.

Though this model avoids depicting nature as a tool, the problem with this model is its practicality as universal empathy is difficult for most people to conceptualize and consequently to actualize. The stewardship model has problems, but self-interest remains far more efficient. The environmental crisis will have disastrous, lasting effects if drastic policy changes are not made in the coming months and years, and now there is not enough time to rely solely on the hope that humans will realize and become committed to all beings in nature.

## BUILDING A SYNCRETIC MODEL AND CONCLUSION

Fortunately, using *The Human Condition* as a model, one can hold these two paradigms simultaneously, without interpreting one as rendering the other invalid when they contradict. Arendt neither acknowledges the apparent tension between her two models, nor does she dwell at length on how they coexist. The best textual resource available for parsing out the relationship between the two paradigms, however, can be found in the prologue when Arendt states that, "[t]he human artifice of the world separates human existence from all mere animal environment, but life itself is outside this artificial world, and *through life* man remains related to all other living organisms."<sup>39</sup> That is, Arendt does not take the human as one self-contained concept that must fit into a single relational structure with nature.

This possibility becomes more vivid when one considers that *homo faber*, at times, labors. Although *animal laborans* is not human because of his natural activity, his lack

<sup>37</sup> *Laudato Si'*, §199.

<sup>38</sup> Himes and Himes, *Fullness of Faith*, 109-110.

<sup>39</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2, emphasis mine.



of humanity remains so because he is *primarily* engaged in labor—not that he labors at all. As such, homo faber does not cease to be fully human when he stops acting for a moment to eat a meal—he is alive, he sleeps and he does many natural things, but he is still homo faber and is still fully human. Accordingly, man straddles the natural and artificial—he is of nature in some aspects, but separate from it in others. We can simultaneously know by virtue of the fact that we are alive, that we are of nature, and that we have the capacity to create and to act in the world that we are not natural.

Similarly, using tools provided by Arendt, one does not have to choose between the stewardship and companionship models of justification for preserving the environment, but rather, one can understand the relationship between man and nature to be twofold or piecemeal. Man can exist in relationality to, and be of, nature while still being its steward. In believing both to be true, man is forced to find a balance between self-interest and empathy, wherein the drawbacks of each model are balanced out by the presence of the other. More can be done quickly in the realm of environmental protection if humans can be motivated simultaneously by a belief that a healthy environment is beneficial to them and by another belief that all the creatures within nature are humanity's companions. ♦

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