

# Reunification of Man and Nature: A Sustainable Worldview

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**Abstract:** The relationship between man and nature has always been the key issue of philosophy. Past research demonstrates that the society changes from the hunter-gatherer and agrarian society to the society of industrialization followed the human worldview transformation from unity to disunity between man and nature, and finally, due to the current social and environmental crisis, we humans have to shift our values and reunify ourselves with nature on a higher level of harmonious coexistence and from a heteronomous society to an autonomous society of global community. Therefore, reunification of man and nature becomes the ideological revolution and the task of practice for this generation and perhaps the next one as each societal change in human history. Its definition, characteristics and principles are also discussed.

**Keywords:** reunification, worldview, unity of man and nature

## Introduction

The unity of man and nature has always been the common worldview that guide the harmonious coexistence between each other in human history until the industrial revolution starting from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. With the Renaissance characterized with human rights, democracy and freedom, the primitive value was broken into the dichotomy view between man and nature. Nature is no longer considered as the “mother” of mankind but just a natural entity that is subjected to and at the service of humans. The traditional reverence and respect toward nature disappeared. With the development of science and technology and the implementation of market system featured with competition and self-maximization, the human became more capable and free to exploit natural resources to satisfy their desires. As human desire is endless and the limitation of natural resources, the theory of economy is created in the purpose of wealth, and the current society for growth established.

As is known to all, the consequence of the society for growth could be on both human society and the natural environment: For the society the growth (1) has not only bring humans more wealth and comfort but also more stress and anxiety in the fierce competition atmosphere, and (2) the larger gap between the rich and the poor, and (3) the strong desire for wealth could inspire some people overuse of resources and challenge laws and social virtue and take the risk of crime. For the natural environment, the sightless growth motivates individuals or organizations and countries deprive natural resources or sacrifice the environment for economic gains. The direct impact of resource

plunder is the increase of environmental crisis and the other consequence would be those with more wealth, to human instinct, would be prouder of themselves and have more power over the poorer, or those weaker, and at the result of more exploitation and even invasion toward others, then conflicts and wars occur.

To tackle the environmental problems, many researchers and scholars have put forward related theories and solutions in various aspects. Daly (1996)<sup>[1]</sup> developed the concepts of sustainable development and that of “circular economies”; Kneese (1995)<sup>[2]</sup> promoted the concepts of mitigation and carbon credits, pollution allowances, and green taxes; Some thinkers propose that human dependence on nonrenewable energy and resources could be released through a technological “greening” way to produce goods and products<sup>[3]</sup>; Still some suggests the human should change their view of life from conquest to respect, or living a simple style may reduce the overuses of energy and resources<sup>[4]</sup> etc. Following the theories, many practice and measures have been done in both organizational, national and international level, such as anti-pollution laws, green movement, animal protection movement etc. It is obvious that the past effort on sustainable development has made great achievement. However, it is also a fact that the above theories and practice can only reduce environmental crisis but will not stop it. The reason is that neither of them steps out of the dichotomy view of man and nature, and they are after all symptom treatments. Just as Martin et al. (2016) stated that *tackling the present environmental crisis will require fundamental societal shifts in values; principles and attitudes...from the current “age of plunder” toward an “age of respect”*.<sup>[5]</sup>

### **Reunification Between Man and Nature**

The relationship between man and nature is always the central topic in all fields of social science and different researchers and scholars have their own unique focuses. However, most philosophers and environmental ethicists tend to analyze it in the society forms of development, e.g. primitive society, agrarian society and industrial society. In the same way, we also talk about these different world views in the three societies.

### **The Unity of Man and Nature**

Unity of man and nature (UMN) is the starting worldview of mankind. In the primitive society, or as Richerson et al. (1996) described as *Hunter-gatherer society, people obtain their food directly from “natural” ecosystems, by hunting wild animals and collecting wild plants*.<sup>[6]</sup> The direct dependence on natural environment for their food, and the detailed knowledge of plants and animals around them is generally reflected in their beliefs and attitudes toward nature and wildlife. Such peoples commonly view themselves as inseparable part of the ecosystems and wildlife around them (Gottlieb 1996<sup>[7]</sup>, Wilber 2000<sup>[8]</sup>). Overall, hunter-gatherer society is generally regarded as the best of all types of societies at coexisting with natural wildlife populations. With the human population grows and more food requirements, people have to seek another way of living. Early agrarian society obtain food not just by foraging in natural ecosystems, but also by planting species that are important food items and/or raising livestock. In ancient China, there's the saying and regulations: *spring for birth, summer for growth, autumn for harvest and winter for storage*. Following the seasonal characteristics, are national regulations such as no catching birds, killing animals and harming eggs in spring, no lopping or fishing in summer, especially no harming to any living things pregnant in any seasons etc.<sup>[9]</sup> It could be the most ecological way of life and the sustainable ideology that guaranteed the Chinese culture lasting two thousand years without change.

In the late agrarian societies humans had learned to use advanced tools and instruments for farming and gained more food products for storage. However, the surplus in food products brought about the emergence of population clusters

and urbanization. From an ecological viewpoint, the emergence of agriculture signifies the expansion of the environment's human carrying capacity (Marten, 2001)<sup>[10]</sup>. In any case, this first wave (Toffler, 1981)<sup>[11]</sup> of transformations, which was also the first and perhaps the most important revolution, divided the unity of humankind and that of man and nature.

### **The Disunity of Man and Nature**

The modern anthropocentric worldview can be traced (1) ideologically to the Creation story told in the book of Genesis in the Judeo-Christian Bible, "*God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image and likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, over all the wild animals and every creature that crawls on the earth'*" (Genesis 2:26). And this gives anthropocentrism the theoretical support for that human beings are the most significant entity with values in the universe while the natural world has value only as it benefits humankind. And (2) this worldview inspired the human curiosity and confidence in developing science and technology marked by Analytical reasoning, methodical reasoning (Descartes), mechanism (Newton), quantification and experimentation (Bacon and Galileo) etc.,<sup>[12]</sup> Which further followed by industrialization that mankind has finally get rid of land and stand in his own position opposite of nature. What's more, we went further from nature after the world adopted the market economy system, characterized with science based free trade and maximizing self-interest. And then the society of growth established featured with ego-centrism, exaggerated optimism, unrestrained liberalism and extreme consumptionism, which lead the environment degradation and resource scarce as we see today.

Fortunately, there are also some enlightened anthropocentrists who identified the root cause of environmental crisis. Roderick Nash who identified the anthropocentric view as the main enemy to all wilderness preservation and suggested that the preservation of the environment for the sake of our own generation's recreation and health (oxygen sinks, etc.) could provide the impetus to slow some profiteering.<sup>[13]</sup> Holmes Rolston also proposed *that it is better to build our cultures in intelligent harmony with the way the world is already built, rather than take control and rebuild this promising planet by ourselves and for ourselves. ... We do not want a de-natured life on a de-natured planet.*<sup>[14]</sup> David Singer further concluded *that the fundamental interest that entitles a being to equal consideration is the capacity for "suffering and/or enjoyment or happiness", and a being's interests should always be weighed according to that being's concrete properties*<sup>[15]</sup>. However, none of them could step out of the human position to view nature, and therefore, their theory and practice have been restricted within the symptom treatment for not being able to touch its fundamentals.

### **Reunification between Man and Nature**

#### ***The Psychological View of UMN***

According to the environmentalists and politics researchers, the dichotomy view of man and nature is the root cause for current environmental crisis as well as social problems, and all claimed that the mankind need a thorough value shift from the dichotomy to the unity view toward the relation between man and nature. In a psychological point of view, the man-nature relationship from unity to disunity is a necessary stage of human cognition toward maturity. Just as the chickens will not grow up if they keep themselves under wings of the hen. The same as human beings, we cannot have a full sight of nature unless we keep distance from it, for *lookers-on see most of the game because they keep cool*. However, as the "son" of nature and one species of ecosystem, mankind could never leave it for life. The dichotomy view between man and nature is bound to be unilateral and temporary, and their unity is eternal no matter

how strong or powerful human being are. Therefore, reunification of man and nature becomes a mindset shift and ideological revolution of the current generation.

### ***The Environment View of UMN***

Past literature on the environment crisis governance shows two extremes of opinions: the anthropocentrism and naturalism. The anthropocentrism insists that they can solve the current crisis by means of advanced science and technology, such as by anti-pollution and emission-reduction etc. to mediate the warm weather problems and by solar energy, the power of winds, the riches of the seas and oceans and others to meet the shortage of resources. On the contrary the latter (John Locke) railed against the harshness of the industrial world and argued that humans need to return to nature in a more natural way of being.<sup>[16]</sup> As we can see, neither of the above approaches could be fundamental and realistic. For the former, it is after all the symptom treatment without the shifts of values and the changes our living styles as we discussed above. For the latter, it is impossible for present humans to return to the primitive times. Therefore, the only choice for mankind is to change the current hostile view toward nature and choose a more ecological style of life.

### ***The Definition of Reunification of Man and Nature***

Before elaborating the definition, it's necessary to review the questions toward the unification arise from past literature. Many scholars or researchers have identified the importance and necessity to change the current anthropocentric to an alternative framework. However, most of them doubt where and what even how to move to? Once we contemplate moving from a strictly instrumental relationship to nature to a more respectful one, problems arise:

*First, which nature are we talking about? Should respect be focused on individual non-humans, such as sentient beings (Taylor, 1986)<sup>[17]</sup> or every living being (Attfield, 1987<sup>[18]</sup>; Callicott 1999<sup>[19]</sup>), or should we be respectful toward the kind of complex entities that conservation cares for, such as populations, species, ecosystems, or landscapes? (Rolston, 1988)<sup>[20]</sup>*

To answer the question, one need to step out of the traditional human-centered perspective and reconsider the relation between man and nature in a cosmos viewpoint. Nature here means the whole universe, including both human beings and nonhuman beings, as well as the natural environment, which are directly or indirectly related to human life and survival. Just as a tree or a plant gains its life from the soil of the earth and the light of the sun and the rain of the atmosphere, and even assistance from the other species etc. and the same as human beings, in a larger biological point of view, the provider to our life and survival may be far more than our parents and the natural environment as we can see and feel. The obvious example is the materials we eat from the earth and the light we enjoy from the sun as well as the other planets in the universe that help keeping them as what they are. In one word, without nature, without humans, and that's why nature is respectful.

*Second, what actually constitutes respect toward nonhuman entities? The answer for individual organisms certainly has to do with their ability to live, flourish, and reproduce. But how can we know what is good for a species or an ecosystem?<sup>[21]</sup>*

As noted above, any entity in the universe could be related to the life of humans and have their own way to communicate and interact with their "mother" nature. However, for centuries, we humans unilaterally think of ourselves to be the only species that is expressive, rational and moral oriented as Kant noted to have intrinsic value

while other entities to have only instrument value. The reason is simple that we value only ourselves because we see others only on our own side. Therefore, only if we change our attitude and stand on the side of nature, we may see other entities with intrinsic value as well as their interests and goods.

*And third, how can we balance divergent responsibilities toward different human and nonhuman entities (Callicott,1996<sup>[22]</sup>; Becker,1976<sup>[23]</sup>) Nature or natural entities cannot speak for themselves. The best we can do is to hypothesize about what is good for other beings.*

Every entity has their own responsibility different from others. Tigers may perform their duty by killing the lower-class animals to keep the biological balance, and trees realize their duty by inhaling carbon monoxide and release oxygen for humans and other living things and flowers show their beauty and give off good/bad smell to other species and themselves. But one thing is certain, the more you get from nature, the more responsibility you have to it. The more you deprive nature, the more you will pay for it. As every entity has its self-organizing system, the nature also need to balance itself for sustainability. Someone may say that nature and natural entities cannot speak for itself, how can we know what is good to them? In fact, our ancient sage already found the answer thousands of years ago. Just as the Confucius say *do not do it to others if you don't want to do it to yourself*. And this might be the way we communicate and interact with other entities, including humans ourselves.

Therefore, we define reunification of man and nature as a process of shifts of values, ideology, mindset and life style from the worldview of disunity to unity between man and nature, from the industrial or post-industrial society to the society of global community so as to realize the final goal of sustainability for both man and nature. This definition lists the contents of reunification.

### ***Shift of values***

In the industry society, humans value themselves as the superiors to the other species in the ecological system in both physical and spiritual aspects, for instance, they can use their powerful brains to develop science and technology. They have free will to build their own happiness even regardless of the sacrifice of other species as well as the resources and environment with advanced means and tools. Now we are clear that this anthropocentric view forgot one important fact that we are only one member of the ecosystem and one tiny part of the universe, and what's more, our life and existence are greatly related to others' sustainability. Therefore, we have to change our values to (a) every species in the ecosystem are equal to have their own intrinsic values (in spite some of them may have special instrumental value to humans); (b) humans share the same resource and environment with any other eco-species. And thus (c) co-existence with other species is the first and the most prior choice of humans, to which (d) humans have to effectively recognize and share the limited resources and environment both with other species and within ourselves, and (e) rethink of the blind "growth" in both economy and society in the past two hundred years.

### ***Shift of ideology***

For centuries, humans created "God" who dominates the world to alleviate the uncertainty toward the mysterious nature. As the development of science, especially the recent discovery in Quantum Mechanics, more and more mysteries are disclosed. Many of the theories of Taoism and Buddhism such as the formation of the universe and its dynamics etc. which we once considered as superstitions are now scientifically proved: that the universe is not created by God or any other creators but by the nature's own dynamics. According to Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, the universe is an integral whole dominated by its own providence which he termed it as "Tao". *Man*

*follows the earth, the earth follows heaven, heaven follows Tao, and Tao follows nature itself*<sup>[24]</sup>. For Buddhism, one existing being is not only part of nature, but also part of his whole organic life in the universe: past, present and future, generation by generation. His life quality is decided by his own *Karma* as Sakyamuni Buddha termed it as his own deeds or behavior toward any species and entities including human beings in the cosmos. Therefore, man should respect, revere nature and follow its natural laws and believe it as the *Tao* or *Karma*, rather than *God* or *Nothing*.

### ***Shift of Mindset***

In the past two centuries, the human has followed an anthropocentric mindset and narrowed our sight within an ego-centric perspective, forgetting the fact that human life is closely interdependent with nature and at a result, lost our way where we ought to go and plunged into the present existence crisis. Therefore, we have to change our mindset from the human-centered perspective to a larger angle of the whole universe so as to be back to the right track of life: human existence is closely related to any other species and entities and thus the most important for human beings to know and to do is the harmony with the other species and entities and within humans themselves in the universe. Therefore, only by mindset shifting to the cosmos perspective can we see the intrinsic values of other species as well as that of other entities and shape our behavior autonomously to a sustainable state with nature. Just as James Carse (1987) noted that *the finite game* oriented with win and lose we humans have been playing in the past few centuries should not be the only and best choice but a temporary and periodical stage in the historical point of view, but *the infinite game* oriented with harmony and sustainability is the best and eternal choice for human existence.<sup>[25]</sup>

### ***Shift of life style***

The current economic growth paradigm inspired an extravagant consumption life style and therefore, followed by a fierce competition and even by-hook society for self-interest maximization to meet the human endless desire for their own convenience, happiness and comfort. And this material and wealth-oriented paradigm has brought the world into a high-cycled consumption of resources. For example, *four-lane highways reduce the use value of an itinerary by pedestrians or cyclists and “impose” investing resources in acquiring a car, with potential counterproductive outcomes. Therefore, critiques of the growth paradigm*<sup>[25]</sup> call for a shift of life style from the one-sided economic growth to the harmonious growth of both wealth and health, from society of consumption to that of frugality, from current luxurious to simpler ways of life.<sup>[26]</sup> Of course, for most people, shifting from car to bicycle for short trips is perceived as self-deprivation. However, once the public witnesses the ecological style of life both benefit his health and the environment, it will become well-accepted.

### ***Shift of society***

Past history of society development demonstrates that each society transition has its inner logic and notation between each other. Population rise, and limited hunting resources decided the transition from hunter-gatherer society to agrarian society. Small-scaled production cannot meet the ever-increasing human demands pushed the agriculture industrialization, and further the society transition from agriculture to industry and post-modern industry society. With the fast development of science and communication technology, especially the internet application and the adoption of science based free trade drove the world to an era of globalization: all humans live in a global village. No individual or country could live without the economic interaction with others, and no nation and organization could individually deal with the environmental crisis that caused by unlimited growth of economy and over use of

science and technology. Therefore, it calls the society transition from current “growth” based and heteronomous society to a society of sustainability based and autonomous global community, of which all countries and peoples have to change their anthropocentric view to the view of unity of man and nature and autonomously adjust, regulate and control their behavior for the common share of environment responsibility and dealing together with the human existence crisis.

## Conclusion

As we can see above that the reunification between man and nature is an inevitable historical trend that is out of the control of human will. It is also obvious that the above changes are somewhat an ideological revolution and an ethical challenge to current values, mindsets and life styles etc. It is likely to challenge the economic sectors who might feel a loss of their growth; and those with faith that technology can solve the problems ahead; and those who benefit financially from overusing resources; and the human penchant of denial for change.<sup>[27]</sup> However, we should be clear that this challenge is different from the past societal change in history e.g. from the hunter-gatherers to agrarians or from agriculture to industry society transition in which we were challenging ourselves to gain confidence but this time we are challenging nature that gives birth to and brings up humans. Therefore, We humans have no choice but to unify ourselves with nature, making up the negative impact on it and return to the way of harmonious coexisting with all the inventories and entities in the universe.

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