

FUTURE VIEW

By Herbert W. Schroeder

Wild Metaphors Nature as Machine or Person?

Nature is more than just a collection of physical and biological resources. It is also an image in our minds and in our hearts. This image includes all the thoughts, feelings, and values that nature evokes—a place of refuge from the demands of society, of encounter with natural forces, and of personal and spiritual transformation.

In thinking about the future, we are confronted with a basic question: To what extent are we willing to live in a world that includes natural processes that are not under our control? Our answer to this depends on the fundamental beliefs that we hold regarding nature and our place in it.

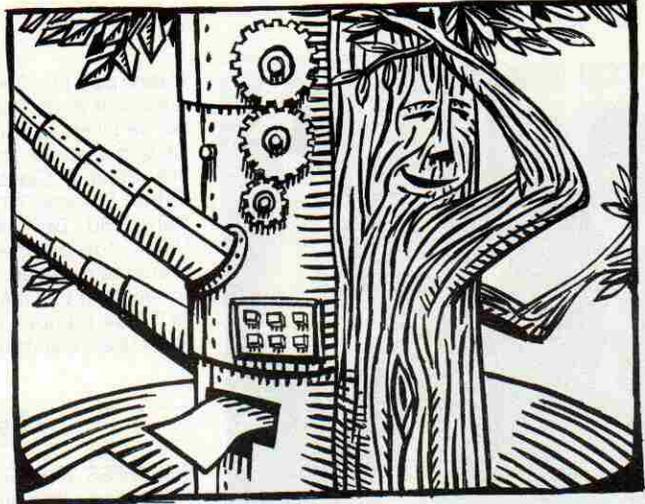
Two very different metaphors have often been used for understanding and thinking about the natural world: nature as a machine and nature as a person. These two metaphors lead to very different implications regarding our rights and responsibilities toward nature.

For the last few centuries, the metaphor of nature as a machine has been the primary means by which science has understood the natural world. Viewing nature as a machine means that it is predictable and, yet, has no mind of its own. It implies that humanity can operate and steer nature in whatever direction we see fit. We might even claim that it is our right and responsibility to take control of the machinery of nature. After all, a machine that is not under anybody's control is not of much use, and perhaps even dangerous.

Machines are always built with a purpose in mind—to perform a task, to create products, or to provide entertainment. Machines also exist for the benefit of the people who build and operate them. If we look at nature in this way, we will probably come to see it as a kind of production process. We will conclude that wilderness areas, when properly managed, can produce benefits for people in the form of pleasurable experiences like solitude and beauty.

But if we look at nature as simply mechanistic, we risk losing the image of wilderness areas as places of refuge, encounter, and transformation. They become just another form of entertainment—a place where we can select and consume the experiences we desire without any risk of being changed in the process. This does not necessarily involve anything that is done physically to the land. The loss results from a way of looking at the land, an attitude that reduces nature to nothing more than a mechanistic system.

As we approach the twenty-first century, we may be able to draw upon another, much older view: the metaphor of nature as a person. Many indigenous cultures treat interactions between human beings and non-human nature as transactions between persons. In these cultures, a human wishing to kill an animal or cut down



Is nature a “machine,” controllable and created for human benefit, or a “person,” with equal rights?

a tree must first ask permission, and afterwards must offer thanks or make amends to the beings that have been affected.

Viewing nature as a person implies that nature has a life, will, and creativity of its own. It implies that nature is not totally predictable or controllable and that humans do not have the right to seek total control over nature. Our responsibility under this metaphor is to respect the autonomy of nature—to care about nonhuman nature for its own sake and grant it at least a measure of freedom to follow its own path.

This does not mean abandoning our own interests and welfare. It simply means that we will need to balance the interests and needs of nonhuman nature along with our own. The metaphor of nature as a person also suggests that if we do not respect nature in this way it may respond to us in a decidedly unfriendly manner.

It is important to recognize that neither of these metaphors conveys the whole truth about the natural world. Nature is neither a machine nor a person in the literal sense. However, each of these metaphors shows us something real and important about our relationship with nature. We need both metaphors, but we also need to find a balance between them.

In the words of poet John Daniel, nature allows us to experience the joy of “listening to what lives outside of our lives.” I believe that keeping this joy alive will be one of our most important responsibilities as we head into the next century. □

About the Author

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