

MICHAEL GIFFIN

# The Strange Death of Mother Nature

Twenty years ago the editor of a journal in a health bureaucracy was confronted with a challenge. The policy officers in primary care decided the term “drowning” was incorrect and attempted to impose what seemed to them a better alternative, “serious immersion”, but the editor refused to co-operate. If that incident ended there, the push keeps pushing. When the meanings of words challenge us, or lead down incorrect paths, progressives invent terms to promote their desired outcome, and proscribe the old meanings. This process can be so subtle the population doesn’t notice until it finds itself down the rabbit hole with Alice or on a farm run by pigs walking on their hind legs.

The term “nature” is an example of this process. Since the Enlightenment, the West has been studiously disengaging from nature’s traditional meanings. Originally, nature (Greek *physis*, Latin *natura*) referred to everything not made by humans; it was once a boundary between human activity and the natural order. Speaking metaphorically, the boundary started to blur when Prometheus flew too close to the sun and became increasingly blurry after Dr Frankenstein created his monster. The boundaries are invisible, now that the repetitive acting-out of *The Rocky Horror Show* has replaced Judeo-Christian belief as the West’s moral compass.

The ancient personification of nature as mother has been replaced by non-gendered, non-human terms such as “biosphere”. The consequences have been profound. Not long ago the concept of mother nature was at best a cosmology, at worst a marketing tool. There was once a value system around the belief that nature had intentions. If you behaved a certain way, believed in certain things, or consumed product such-and-such, you would be in harmony with what she intended. Attempts to invest the biosphere with this mystical role lack poetic resonance.

The Enlightenment was driven by four broad ideas. First, a commitment to *reason* as the proper tool and final authority for judging truth-claims. Second, a stress on *nature* and an appeal to what’s

*natural*. Third, a belief in *progress*. Fourth, a rejection of the *authority* of any tradition, based on historical evidence or metaphysical systems, which couldn’t withstand what Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (1975) calls “the judgment seat of reason”.

Simplistic appeals to the Enlightenment tend to be made by those who take its meaning for granted, but are stumped if asked to describe it, and become defensive if asked for working definitions of *reason*, *nature*, *progress* and *authority*. In public discourse and private speech, these terms mean what Humpty Dumpty wants them to mean, and for him it’s about who’s master. In theory, if you control the word, you control the world. In practice, if you don’t understand your terms of reference, eventually you’ll fall off the wall, your shell will crack open, and your guts will spill out.

It’s often said that the instability of our age is similar to 1930s Europe, which in some senses is true, but the similarities are more analogous with 1790s France. When the Enlightenment is invoked, the Reign of Terror is seldom mentioned, and the dots are rarely connected between the *philosophes*, the guillotine, and what the Jacobin revolutionary J.B. Carrier called the republican marriages celebrated in the national bathtub. This is a euphemism for what happens when ideologues form a group and stage mass murder.

According to the expurgated version, the Enlightenment was a triumph of reason and science over myth and superstition; it was when Christianity was finally exposed as fake news. In the unexpurgated version, Catholics were systematically persecuted and thousands of priests and religious were executed. Protestants were spared, for the most part, because they identified as rational and scientific; somewhat strangely, their news was understood to be less fake than Catholic news. Christianity was suppressed and replaced by an atheistic state religion, the Cult of Reason, which made way for the Cult of the Supreme Being a year later. The real goal was to destroy the Catholic Church, because public

persecution is always about eliminating enemies, cementing ideology and consolidating power.

At the time, the citizenry were unable to acknowledge what was happening or were complicit for various reasons. Some were *tricoteuses*, women who knitted beside the guillotine, lauded as role models, much as feminists are today. The same could be said of popular reaction to today's culture wars. Judging from the state of the commentariat and social media, everyone's a *philosophe* now. The guillotine is just over there, in the marketplace of ideas, where there's no shortage of *tricoteuses*.

The *philosophes* used a vague definition of reason, and an equally vague definition of science, to attack superstition, bigotry, fanaticism and religious intolerance as the chief obstacles to freedom of thought and social reform. They believed a society based on their vague reason and vague science would lead to correct thinking, which would automatically solve problems and lead to progress. Their problem was an inability to define reason or accept the liminality of science. Science is never settled and can take us where a civilisation shouldn't go.

The core tenet of the French Revolution was anthropocentrism, the ultra-rationalist idea, echoing Protagoras, that man is the measure of all things. This tenet is still deeply embedded in every conscious act of modern culture. After Darwin, the theory of natural selection became an alternative to religion, so those who didn't believe in God could still believe in nature with a capital N. Through scientific naturalism, the legitimate child of Romanticism, nature was understood as an organic self-governing unity, "red in tooth and claw" according to Tennyson's famous elegy "In Memoriam".

Has the time come to ask whether, and on what basis, the average Westerner still regards nature as an organic self-governing unity, or whether natural selection is still a viable theory? Has the juggernaut of technological advancement combined with the collapse of traditional moral frameworks to render the ideas of nature and natural selection untenable? If we say we still believe in them, do we really behave as if we do?

These questions flow from the larger question of origins, how organic life came *ex nihilo* from inorganic matter. In 1927 the Big Bang Theory was proposed by a Catholic priest, Georges Lemaître, so the theory doesn't contradict Christian ideas

about creation if they are properly understood. The Big Bang released matter and energy, but only a handful of elements necessary for life, so how did nature come into being? Did a second Bang do that? Evolution, the scientific theory of how life evolved, tells us nothing about how life began before evolution was set in motion. Did a third Bang do that? The same holds for human uniqueness, its anthropology and psychology, since we don't know when the singularity of the human body and mind began. Did a fourth Bang do that? If we're honest, we must admit our anthropocentrism, deeply embedded in every conscious act of modern culture, is limited to manipulating life-forms we didn't create.

When Nietzsche proclaimed God's death, a consensus about the mystery of origins was lost. Once that happened the mystery of nature could only survive as long as anthropocentrism was held in check. With each human triumph—antiseptics, vaccines, anaesthetics, penicillin, the bomb, the pill, lunar travel, organ transplants, antiretroviral therapy, cloning, sex-reassignment surgery, nanotechnology, gene therapy, growing meat like plants—two things happened. First, the truer anthropocentrism seemed, the less important nature seemed. Second, any morality derived from nature became less possible. This process was gradual and one-way.

Traditionally, Western ethics were deduced through two broad prisms, the deontological and the teleological. The deontological prism, normally associated with Protestantism, revolved around the notions of covenant, duty and obligation. Before the Enlightenment, it was the ethical prism of bible-based religion, while its modern forms include professional codes of conduct, consequentialism, utilitarianism and ultimately hedonism. The teleological prism, normally associated with Catholicism, revolved around the theory of natural law, through which certain human rights were inherent to being made in God's image (*imago dei*) and from possessing God's gift of human reason. According to the classical correspondence theory of truth, on which natural law depends, the social order mirrors a natural order which mirrors a divine order. Since natural law comes from God it's objective, universal and independent of the laws of states, societies, politics and legislatures.

Why did Protestant ethics, which began in a Bible-based morality focused on the individual as an autonomous subject who interprets, eventually

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lead to the hedonism of modern, liberal, capitalist democracies? Why did Catholic ethics, which held out against modernity and modernism until the middle of the twentieth century, capitulate to them after Vatican II? Some answers come from cultural anthropology, which theorises a shift from societies based on guilt and collectivism to societies based on pleasure and individualism. Other answers can be found in unresolved tensions within the yet-to-be-completed Enlightenment project, which revolve around the contested meanings of reason, nature, progress and authority.

In his influential book *After Virtue* (1981), Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that the ethical prisms emerging from the Enlightenment were doomed from the start. Why? Because each of them rejected the Aristotelian idea that humanity has a *telos*, a goal or purpose, an orientation towards *eudaimonia*, human flourishing, a God towards which human life is directed. Already an Aristotelian, MacIntyre became a Thomist after writing *After Virtue*, once he was convinced that Aquinas was “an excellent interpreter” of Aristotle “able to extend and deepen” Aristotle’s metaphysics and morality.

MacIntyre mounts a defence of classical metaphysics, which locates humanity’s *telos* in Aquinas’s interpretation of Aristotle. This issues a brave challenge to the zeitgeist, because the entire trajectory of Continental philosophy after Kant—within critical theory, communication studies, and among the Left—was anti-Scholastic; premised on an emancipatory or immanent critique of classical metaphysics as an elaborate form of fake news. For example, the philosopher of immanence, Gilles Deleuze, believes Plato’s Theory of Forms introduced a “poisonous transcendence” into classical Greek philosophy, which had supposedly been holistic under the Pre-Socratics. Therefore, Deleuze says, every reaction against Platonism is a restoration of immanence which forbids a return to Platonic transcendence. The Incarnation of Jesus doesn’t count as immanence, in this line of revisionist thought, since Deleuze sees it as an example of poisonous transcendence. Those who equate Christianity with Platonic transcendence will always regard it as a cause of the problem the philosophers of immanence are trying to solve.

Since the Enlightenment, atavistic anti-Catholicism has remained the last acceptable prejudice in Western culture. It was explicit until after the Second World War, was implicit for a few decades, and became explicit again with the general antipathy towards religion after 9/11. The public persecution of George Pell is an excellent case study of this phenomenon.

The reasons for the phenomenon are complex but have their origin, first, in the emancipatory or

immanent critique of classical metaphysics; second, in the widespread inability to distinguish between Islamic fundamentalism and any religious belief unacceptable to the Left. Add to this the existential crisis within Western Christianity itself. As Rod Dreher points out in *The Benedict Option* (2017), most Western Christians don’t profess the fundamentals of the faith their forebears professed. If they did profess those fundamentals, they would be accused of fundamentalism, which places them in a double bind. To be acceptable to secular society, to which they’re hostage, Western Christians are pressured into professing a faith their forebears wouldn’t recognise and which isn’t Christian anyway.

The critical tension within Western Christianity is maintaining a sense of what the faith does or doesn’t allow and what can or can’t be changed. This tension isn’t helped by the Global North colonising the planet with its false gospel of progressivism. The Western church is evaporating at a fast pace. If it is to survive what’s ahead, it must rediscover, celebrate and proclaim its fundamental beliefs, like the Early Church, knowing the next Reign of Terror has already begun.

By simply existing, conservative Christians challenge a progressive culture seemingly confident of, yet deeply confused by, its terms of reference. For example, whenever terrorism occurs, anywhere in the world, there is a tendency to blame it on conservative religion. Hiding behind the idea of *their* rationality, progressives erroneously attach the label of fundamentalism to those who take the fundamentals of their faith seriously. This is strange, given the inherent totalitarianism of progressivism.

Irrationality is in the eye of the beholder. One person’s rationality is another person’s irrationality and vice versa. The suicide bombers who flew those planes into the Twin Towers were calculatingly rational, according to their definition of rationality, which is obviously different from the one usually invoked with such facility in the West.

Each of us has prejudices, and, more than anything, our prejudices define us. Gadamer believed the Enlightenment’s goal of banishing prejudice was misguided, and itself a prejudice, because some prejudices are true while others are false. For Gadamer, it’s the task of reason to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate prejudices. This cannot be accomplished without a respectful dialogue about reason rather than the simplistic declarations Westerners habitually make. Benedict XVI tried to propose such a dialogue in his widely misrepresented Regensburg Lecture of September 2006. He wasn’t successful because he was atavistically disliked by progressives.

The Christian formula for enlightenment comes from Christ: who he is, what he did, what he asks. Paul puts it thus in 1 Corinthians 1:22–23: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.” As Benedict said in Regensburg, because Christ is the Logos, which means word or reason, Christians cannot separate Christ from reason. Natural law presupposes a natural order, which presupposes a creator God, who gave us human reason to work all this out, so let’s do it.

In the West, the anthropocentric inheritance of the Enlightenment has created an ever-expanding culture of human rights; however, all discourse about human rights, including the idea of natural rights, descends not from the Enlightenment but from the natural-law tradition of Aquinas as an explicitly Western discourse. Secular formulas for natural law are emerging, which try to ground themselves in the idea of universal human dignity, but how can human dignity be universal apart from the Dignifier who dignifies it? Where does this secular universality come from, if not from a creator God?

Since the Enlightenment, the meaning of the Christ event has been challenged, increasingly, by a secular world that Christians are called to stand apart from. To appease this secular world, many believers have become modern-day Marcionites or Pelagians, which means they’ve embraced heresy. They assume Christ freed them from the Law, so the Law no longer applies to them. Increasingly, under pressure from feminism, Cultural Marxism, identity politics, and the human rights industry, one hears progressive Christians putting a heterodox spin on the idea of God’s love. They promote the non-biblical idea of Jesus on the Cross, embracing all creation, indiscriminately, non-judgmentally, making no moral demands upon them whatsoever. This reduces their faith to the therapeutic level of New Age spirituality: aromatherapy, yoga, massage, eroticism, whatever makes them feel good.

If Christians are to remain orthodox, in the broadest sense of professing the living dialogical faith defined in the church’s creeds—the faith proclaimed by the apostles, the faith written and canonised as scripture, the faith which survived the heresies of the first four centuries, the Reformation and the Enlightenment—they must take Jesus’s claim in

Matthew 5:18 seriously: “For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” Jesus was passionate about halakhic debate, which means he took Torah seriously. Simply put, Matthew 5:18 is a warning against progressive Christians making up a liberationist Jesus, to suit whatever ails the body politic, to support whatever confected human right is fashionable at the moment. The meaning of Christ isn’t determined by the marketplace of ideas.

Shifts in public opinion, the rationalisation of evil, the glamourisation of sin, may tell us something about sociology, psychology and politics, but they don’t determine morality. Polls, surveys and markets don’t govern good and evil. Populism and the media don’t control right and wrong. If a poll were taken now, asking Americans whether the US should have dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945, the results would probably be a resounding No; however, if a poll had been taken at the time, among Americans wanting the war to end, the results would probably have been a resounding Yes. Polls and surveys must have nothing whatsoever to do with a civilisation’s moral compass.

In the Roman empire, a foetus or a child wasn’t regarded as a person until a father acknowledged his paternity. Until that happened, the foetus or child could be killed, exposed or enslaved. This neo-Pagan principle has returned to the West, disguised as a woman’s right to control her body free from patriarchal oppression. Any moral appeals to human responsibility, the limits of freedom, or the right to life, are silenced with pre-emptive accusations of conservative bigotry. Further, women who say, “I would never have an abortion, personally, but I believe it’s a woman’s right to choose,” are evading the moral issue entirely. For Christians, abortion may be a human responsibility, under certain circumstances, but it can never be a human right because God commands them not to kill.

The definition of tolerance is coexisting with those one disagrees with. In theory, tolerance doesn’t require the celebration of differences. In practice, in the progressive West, those who don’t celebrate the differences they disagree with are labelled intolerant, racist, misogynistic, homophobic and transphobic. This was noticeable during the same-sex-marriage campaign, which was entirely populist and market-driven. There was a complete absence of moral debate. Simply maintaining a civil silence, or

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pointing out that heterosexual marriage is normative, or that males and females are complementary, was construed as hate speech.

One dark fact was never mentioned during the SSM campaign. In 1992 the humanitarian icon Fred Hollows said HIV-infected persons should be quarantined to protect vulnerable sub-populations such as Aborigines because in Australia the epidemic was “basically a homosexual problem”. While this prejudice is easily contextualised, with the benefit of hindsight, basic logic tells us the result of the SSM postal survey would have been No, had the medical profession not been able to offer antiretroviral treatment for HIV infection from 1996 or couldn’t cure serious sexually-transmitted diseases such as syphilis. The social tolerance we currently take for granted depends on a society feeling safe from threats to its public health. This has nothing to do with morality or religious belief. It’s just common sense.

Gender dysphoria appeared on the scene, relatively suddenly, through leftist lobbying and manipulation of public opinion, with no moral consideration. It’s a social fashion looking for legitimation as it expands its market share. The science around gender dysphoria is weak and contentious, like the science around climate change, although lobby groups erroneously insist the science is strong and settled. Gender dysphoria has been approached as a human rights issue, but it’s really an issue of public mental health (a social psychosis). Anti-discrimination legislation was adapted to accommodate it. The right of biological males to use female facilities and join female sporting teams was adopted. Speech was compelled. Specious treatment protocols were produced from thin air. Children’s puberties were and are blocked, healthy organs were and are cut out, and a lifetime of hormone treatment was and is prescribed.

According to a recent study published by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the risk of transgendered youth suicide increases exponentially, with suicide attempts at 50 per cent for male teens and 30 per cent for female teens. Among those who transition, a significant proportion experience sex-change regret over time. We can only hope they sue those who irresponsibly promoted and participated in their transition.

Curiously, the interests of cisgendered gays and lesbians have been commandeered by the interests of the transgendered, as the meaningless initialism LGBT+ continues to be repeated mindlessly. Camille Paglia, the celebrity academic feminist and lesbian, speaks of the current transgender obsession, calling medical and surgical intervention in minors child abuse. Her research tells her that, throughout history, an obsession with gender fluidity has always been a sign of imminent civilisational collapse. Her

thinking appeals to post-*Sturm und Drang* distinctions between Apollonian civilisation and Dionysian nature, the dialectic of which is entering a perilous new cycle.

If there’s any morality left, deontological or teleological, I wish someone would tell me what it looks like. From where I stand, the urgent challenge facing the West is constructing a moral rationalisation for the exercising of unrestrained human will and uninhibited human desire. The hegemony of anthropocentrism, the idea that man is the measure of all things, has hitherto been unable to articulate a moral framework to replace the one that, we’re repeatedly told, was the bedrock of Western civilisation until just the other day.

Philosophers of immanence such as Deleuze believe Platonic transcendence was a “poisoned gift” that gave “plausible philosophical meaning” to a Judeo-Christian belief in the “triumph of the judgment of God”. So, paradoxically, what the Left sees as the fatal flaw in classical metaphysics is precisely what gave it enduring strength: Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian revelation unified into a logically coherent whole. The central premise of the Left, that God neither exists nor judges, because man is the measure of all things, has actively undermined Judeo-Christian morality since the Romantic period. The problem with this thinking is its permanent inability to articulate an anthropocentric equivalent of God answering Job out of the whirlwind: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding.” (Job 38:4).

As Dennis Prager says: “Good societies can survive people doing immoral things. But a good society cannot survive if it calls immoral things moral.” The West has been trying to call immoral things moral since the French Revolution. One must wonder what’s more immoral, the recent invention of a female penis and testicles, which demand to be waxed, or a culture of indiscriminate anti-discrimination that makes it illegal for female waxers to say No.

The Enlightenment isn’t finished. It never got off the ground. The West still doesn’t know what it means by reason, nature, progress or authority. The Reign of Terror is still being re-enacted, as the Counter-Enlightenment continues its war on the Enlightenment. Who will win depends entirely on how long the gender-bending power of *The Rocky Horror Show* maintains its grip on our moral compass.

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