Editorial

STRUGGLING OVER NATURE

Nature stands at the very center of an intense struggle today. We witness it in passionate controversy over basic questions. How urgent is it that we care for the natural environment? How should we care for it? Should embryos, even those that are surplus products of fertility therapy, be treated as if they were human beings? How many nonhuman animals, rhesus monkeys, for example, can be destroyed in testing that aims at benefits for humans? Where do we draw the line between therapy and enhancement in our genetic engineering? What limits, of any, should be set for stem-cell research? How do we set priorities for balancing medical research and care that aims at curing diseases and that which aims at improving ourselves and our daily lives? And how does one define *improvement*? Does sexual dysfunction rate the same priority for medical attention as HIV/AIDS or cancer? How should we govern the production of genetically modified foods?

These are all questions about nature. We have been interacting with nature for as long as we have been humans, the nature that surrounds us as ambience and shapes us from within, and yet we do not understand nature fully enough, and we have reached no consensus as to its significance. One need only raise certain questions to see the anxieties grow: Are we simply another kind of animal? Does the natural world really exist just for our benefit? Are humans more than a passing scene in the drama of cosmic evolution? The religions of the world are as much challenged by these questions as the secular societies in which we live. At one and the same time, modern science has given us immeasurably more knowledge about nature—from quark to gene to galaxy—and destabilized much of what we have believed about nature over the millennia of human evolution.

This struggle over nature is mirrored in the discussions between science and religion. It is not too much to say that in some circles there is open warfare between contesting ideas of nature. At one end of the spectrum are the "supernaturalists," armed with sophisticated philosophical arguments as to why nature requires a transcendent order. For these thinkers, "naturalism" and "materialism" are epithets characterizing those views that deny the depths and heights of human nature and undercut values as well

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as our attempts to frame the meaningfulness of life. At the other end are the "physicalists," who consider supernaturalism and idealism to be archaic metaphysical systems, strategies for denying that nature is the theater in which values and meaning emerge and play out their roles.

In this contest of ideas, serious hopes and fears are at stake. On the one hand, there is the conviction that nature is an empty idea apart from the values that guide our lives. We are near consensus that nature is not a script from which we can read off values and meanings. The "isms" of naturalism, materialism, and even evolutionism frighten many people, because they seem to threaten the resources from which we derive values and meaning. On the other hand, there are good reasons for insisting that nature and the sciences, rather than inherited philosophies, should serve as baseline for our thinking. Some worry that our values and meaning should rest upon premodern religious and humanistic traditions that have simply lost their credibility in the face of our expanding knowledge of the natural world. Our perennial traditions have the same status as poetry—and how does one bring poetry to bear on scientific knowledge? Furthermore, there is no consensus among these traditions. Jews and Roman Catholics, for example, do not agree on when a human fetus is to be given the dignity of human being. Certain humanistic traditions, along with some religions, value human life on a totally unique level, vastly superior to all other forms of life. Other religions view humans and the animals as siblings.

The religion-and-science discussion includes both supernaturalists and physicalists, but most of us stand at some midpoint on the spectrum. Most thinkers struggle to articulate a position that observes the concerns of both ends of the spectrum and yet provides an alternative to them. We take scientific naturalism with utter seriousness and at the same time believe that there is a "More" to nature that grounds values and meaning. Moreover, we are clear that our quandary over nature is rooted in conflicting ideas about nature—worldviews and metaphysical systems. That is why most of the discussion in this journal takes place at this level of ideas about nature.

This issue of *Zygon* was put together with no thought at all about the struggle of ideas that I have just described. But the reader will see that this struggle runs like a thread through every article.

Ervin Laszlo (philosophy) opens up the issues with his view that the scientific view of nature is itself changing right before our eyes. He will provoke much discussion when he writes: "The perennial religious intuition of a transcendental act of creation is a logical entailment of the randomly entirely improbable fine tuning of the natural laws and processes that the observed universe manifests." Which is the ground for his belief in *both* science and God.

The symposium on Gregory Peterson's book on cognitive science and theology is a gold mine for reflections on nature. In his discussion of

human freedom in the context of the cognitive sciences, Michael Spezio (neuroscience) argues for a multiperspectival approach in which equal validity is granted to our experience of both freedom and determinism. He labels these perspectives "first-person, second-person, and third-person." Dennis Bielfeldt (philosophy, theology) argues that cognitive science cannot escape a physicalist position that stands as antithesis to theology. In his response to Spezio and Bielfeldt, Peterson reflects at length on nature and its possibilities. He introduces an intriguing idea of "deep physicalism," which is preferable to the more common "nonreductive physicalism." Deep physicalism commits itself to scientific explanations while remaining committed "to the stubbornness of the data and does not simply pigeonhole complex phenomena into existing scientific categories."

Philip Clayton (philosophy, theology) focuses on the issue of causation and natural law, giving his own version of a "deep" approach to nature through the concept of emergence. Clayton explicitly seeks a middle position that "reduces the distance" between the two ends of the spectrum that I have described. James Proctor (geography) describes five prevailing metaphors, or visions, of nature that are prevalent today and concludes that nature simply cannot be subsumed under any one of them. He settles for his own kind of multiperspectivalism that acknowledges that the truth about nature is finally a mystery.

The last three articles in this issue present a variety of concrete studies of our theme. Thomistic philosophy has erected a middle position in understanding nature that endures to this day as a major partner in our conversation. Craig Boyd (philosophy) takes us into the current debate over whether Thomas is compatible with sociobiology—a debate that hinges on one's idea of nature. Hector Qirko (anthropology) focuses on empirical study, the evolutionary perspective on altruistic celibacy in religious communities. His piece is a fascinating description of how nature brings both genetic predisposition and culture to bear in concrete strategies of adaptation. Arvind Sharma (comparative religion) tells how the neuroscientific studies of Eugene d'Aquili clarify a classic Hindu text.

We do not settle the issues pertaining to nature in this issue of our journal. We do believe that the authors presented here deepen our understanding of nature and offer insights into why we should devote ourselves to exploring the vast middle ground between supernaturalism and physicalist naturalism.

—Philip Hefner