

# THE NATURE OF NATURE: INTERPRETATIONS OF TEILHARD DE CHARDIN'S ECOLOGICAL ESCHATOLOGICAL VIEWS

by Libby Osgood 

*Abstract.* In the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the word “nature” occurs more than a thousand times, though this term is not listed in the Teilhard Lexicon by Si on Cowell. A qualitative analysis of *nature* throughout Teilhard’s writings produced 13 distinct definitions that can be summarized into five categories; *nature* can be an inherent way of being, sacred, an object, or that which is not artificial. The multivalent term has produced different interpretations of Teilhard’s work, specifically in the ecological eschatological question of whether living organisms will be included in the final transformation. Theologians’ responses to this question range from affirmation to dissension, with varying levels of certainty, demonstrating the variability that can be caused by ambiguous language.

*Keywords:* ecology; eschatology; language; nature; Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

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The fluidity of language allows for a poem and a paragraph to express the same message but through vastly different mediums. The interchangeability of individual words through the use of synonyms provides an author with myriad options, which can make the text more colorful or more straightforward depending upon the author’s intent and serves to prevent the repetition of a single word. However, having a multitude of ways to express an idea can produce contradictory interpretations of the text, obfuscating the original intent of the author. In technical papers, language must be precise and exact, to prevent multiple interpretations of a work. In artistic mediums, there can be more variation, allowing space for the ideas to reverberate within the reader before settling on a particular meaning.

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The writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) straddle theology and science and are imbued with synonyms. Though synonyms can be an effective literary tool to emphasize a particular point, they can also have the opposite effect and leave a text open to interpretation. For example, while Teilhard was a stretcher-bearer during World War I, he explained the following in a letter to his cousin, “Instinctively, I’d much rather have an earth full of animals than one inhabited by men. Every man forms a little world on his own, and this pluralism is essentially distasteful to me” (Teilhard 1965d, 202). The synonyms *earth* and *world* functionally connect the ideas in the adjacent sentences without repeating an individual word. The figurative purpose of these two synonyms emphasizes Teilhard’s point regarding the separateness of humanity, due to the nuanced differences in their definitions. In this context, *earth* is used to describe the physical planet, and *world* is used to describe an imaginary boundary surrounding each individual, encompassing the physical world and the experiences unique to the individual. However, *world* could also be interpreted as solely the experiences of the individual, thereby excluding the physical entities. This interpretation would shift Teilhard’s meaning to be a commentary on humanity’s disregard of the physical world resulting from their myopic individual realities.

According to the *Teilhard Lexicon* by Siôn Cowell (2001), Teilhard uses the terms *earth*, *world*, *planet*, *cosmos*, and *universe* interchangeably. Though Teilhard uses these five words as synonyms, they have vastly different spatial implications, as the planet known as Earth is much smaller than the entire universe. Consider two subgroups: (1) the earth, world, and planet, and (2) cosmos and universe. If terms are imprecisely exchanged, the meaning can be affected, as the first smaller group can be included in the second larger group, but the second larger group cannot be included in the first smaller group, that is, the world is part of the universe, but the universe is not part of the world. It would be inaccurate to say, “There are many stars in the world,” even though *world* and *universe* are defined as synonyms in the lexicon.

Additionally, the physical phenomena (such as the plants, animals, and minerals) that exist on each of the entities may or may not be assumed to be included in that entity. For example, the *earth* could mean the geological magma-filled rock, while the *world* could mean all life on that rock as well as the rock itself. An alternate definition for *world* may include only the global collective of humanity and exclude the magma-filled rock, as well as the flora and fauna on the rock.

The interpretation of a text can be further complicated when adding the figurative meanings of the terms, as the previous two paragraphs only consider the physical aspects of the terms. Though the term *universe* often means the physical planets and atoms, it can also encompass the metaphysical and spiritual aspects contained therein, such as consciousness. It

is only from the context that one can hope to differentiate which meaning is intended.

There is one word that is curiously excluded from the list of interchangeable terms *earth, world, planet, cosmos, and universe* in the *Teilhard Lexicon*: the word *nature*. The absence of *nature* in the list might have been mere oversight, but the mystery was too intriguing to ignore. An examination of Teilhard's essays for the use of the term *nature* revealed that the term *nature* appears more than a thousand times (1965a, 1965b, 1966a, 1966b, 1968b, 1968c, 1969, 1970, 1971, [1975] 2002, 1978, 2004, 2008). When the search criteria are expanded to include the adverb *naturally* and adjective *natural*, there are nearly 3,000 passages. However, to bound the discussion and prevent scope creep, this article will be focused only on the term *nature*.

The motivation to examine the use of *nature* in Teilhard's essays is derived from the absence of a word in the *Teilhard Lexicon* (Cowell 2001). The resulting definitions for *nature* spawned an exploration into the impact of the ambiguity of language. The resulting landscape of potential interpretations was vast and varied. Thus, nothing evolved into something, which complexified into more, in a literary transformation of becoming.

Teilhard uses *nature* with such regularity that the word regularly appears twice in a single sentence. To describe the evolution of consciousness, Teilhard explains two assumptions are needed, "the pre-eminent significance of man in nature, and the organic nature of mankind" (2008, 30).<sup>1</sup> The two entries use two different definitions of *nature*. In the first instance, *nature* describes all of creation or the natural world. In the second instance, *nature* is an abstract concept or character trait.

Teilhard's use of multivalent words could contribute to the variation in interpretations of his writings. At the intercept of ecological theology and eschatology, theologians purport different interpretations of Teilhard's work regarding the role of the living world (plants and animals, not humans or the planet itself) in the final transformation (the ultimate becoming at the apex of evolution). I contend that the expansive and interchangeable uses of *nature* produce ambiguity and lead to multiple interpretations of Teilhard's eschatological texts regarding the final transformation of the living world.

To examine this supposition, this article is divided into three sections: First, there is an exploration of the current landscape within ecological theology of the diverse interpretations of the final transformation of the living world. Second, the multifaceted meanings of *nature* that Teilhard employs are examined. Finally, a single eschatological passage from Teilhard is interpreted multiple times using the lenses of *nature* developed in the second section, to reimagine the landscape of possibilities of the final transformation of the living world.

## THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

In the current landscape of ecological eschatological literature, there are writings that directly address Teilhard's views on the role of the living world in the final transformation. A theologian's interpretation of Teilhard's works can also be extracted indirectly from their writings, albeit with an element of uncertainty. The examination of the existing literature is divided into two sections accordingly.

*Writings that Directly Address Teilhard's Position*

Although Teilhard prolifically professes his love for the universe, Paul Santmire posits that Teilhard ascribes to a paradoxical devaluation of that living world during the final transformation (1985, 165). Santmire explains Teilhard's eschatology as "the *abolition of nature*, except for those small portions of the bio-physical order that have been taken up, and spiritualized, in human souls" (1985, 165). Santmire asserts that according to Teilhard, the living world is not redeemed. Santmire's conclusion employs definitive, unequivocal language, leaving little room for interpretation.

Similarly, definitive, yet reaching an opposite conclusion to Santmire are John Haughey and John Haught. According to Haughey's interpretation of Teilhard's work, "The endpoint of this matter-spirit interaction will be an eventual transfiguration of all that God has created when God will be 'all in all'" (2014, 205). Haughey would support that *all* of the living world will be included in the final transformation [according to Teilhard].

In an article comparing the theology of Paul Tillich and Teilhard, Haught concludes that the inclusion of the living world in the theologies of Tillich and Teilhard does not require us "to turn our backs on the universe or the earth in order to approach the kingdom of God" (2002, 543). Haught further advocates that *all creation* is included in the final transformation through a revised hymn to the Holy Spirit *Veni, Creator Spiritus* published by Ewert Cousins:

... *Creative love energy*,  
 Infuse the divine milieu  
 With energizing love  
 And bring all creation  
 To the completion of Omega. (Cousins 1969; Haught 2011, 58, 176)

Anchored by the certainty of Santmire, Haught, and Haughey, three theologians assert that there is uncertainty in Teilhard's position of the role of the living world in the final transformation. Denis Edwards states that though the living world will find redemption in a way that cannot currently be explained, Teilhard does not "respond directly to the question of the future of individual nonhuman organisms" and instead bypasses the question with a radical focus on humanity (2006, 93, 98; 2017, 205).

Thomas Berry excuses this anthropocentric focus as a demand of the religious commitments of Teilhard's time, perhaps referring to the oath against Modernism that Teilhard mentions in *Letters from Hastings* (Berry 1982, 22–24; Teilhard 1968a, 123). Berry agrees with Edwards' position that Teilhard's work "needs extension," but Berry is more confident that Teilhard includes the living world in the final transformation. Berry explains, "There are sufficient references in Teilhard to the "living earth" to justify a shift in emphasis toward the more inclusive evolutionary process" (1982, 22–24).

Elizabeth Johnson purports that Teilhard's ecological eschatology requires nuancing (2014, 11). She refers to the Omega Point, which is Teilhard's eschatological vision of the culmination of evolution and the unification through Christ. Johnson explains that the evolution to the Omega Point "subsumes the natural world into human destiny," implying that though the living world is included in the final transformation, Teilhard ascribes a subordinate role to the living world (2014, 11).

#### *Writings that Require Extension*

It is generally accepted that the Omega Point is the expression of Teilhard's eschatology. However, this necessitates a slight extension and interpretation of the text. The next group of theologians agree with Haught and Haughey that the living world is included in the final transformation, though they use different phrases to describe *the living world*. Ilia Delio explains that "As Omega, Christ is suprapersonal in nature, the divine depth of love who fills all things and who animates and gathers up all the biological and spiritual energies in the universe" (2014, 47). Through Christ (the Omega Point), all of the biological and spiritual energies contained in the universe will be included in the final transformation. Similarly, Jean Du Toit states that in the Omega Point, "All reality will be unified, not only humanity" (2013, 94). This emphasizes the value of the living world and firmly places the living world in the Omega Point. Gloria L. Schaab, James O'Brien, and Russel B. Norris use the phrases "the whole universe, what is natural" (Schaab 2007, 20), "both man and nature" (O'Brien 1988, 346), and "the whole physical universe" (Norris 1995, 9) to affirm that the living world will be included in the final transformation. The terms *all creation*, *the whole physical universe*, *all reality*, *what is natural*, *both man and nature*, and the *biological and spiritual energies* are consistent with the definition of the living world used throughout this article.

Similarly, inclusive of the living world in the final transformation, Paul Tillich argues that Teilhard's universal approach toward the living world should be consistently applied throughout his theology, which would include his eschatology. "For man is a part of nature and statements about nature underlie every statement about him" (1963, 5). According

to Tillich, rather than being ambiguous, all of Teilhard's eschatological statements about humanity are imbued with a sense of inclusivity toward the living world.

In texts that do not directly concern the role of the living world in the final transformation, Pope Francis and Thomas Merton use language that is more ambiguous and could produce multiple interpretations. In *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis explains, "The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things" (2015, sec. 83). The corresponding footnote states that "Against this horizon we can set the contribution of Fr Teilhard de Chardin" (2015, sec. 83n53). Pope Francis explains that Teilhard contributes to this understanding that the universe (which arguably incorporates the living world) is included in the ultimate destiny.

Employing Teilhard's eschatological language of divination, transformation, and consecration, in his review of the *Divine Milieu*, Thomas Merton said "It is the duty of the Christian to love the world by doing all in his power, with the help of God's grace and fidelity to the demands of the divine will in his everyday life, to "redeem" the whole world, to transform and consecrate it to the divinizing power of the Spirit of Christ" (1985, 182). Merton describes Teilhard's belief that humanity must aid in the effort of redemption of *the whole world*, a phrase that likely means the living world, but could mean *all the people of the world* as well.

Employing a potentially ambiguous phrase for *the living world*, Agustin Udias describes the Omega Point as a "personal union of all the rational elements of the world" (2009, 14). The term *rational* excludes the living world from the final transformation, but not explicitly as some animals show the capacity for rational decision making. This position of exclusion is reminiscent of Thomas Aquinas' eschatological views, which include the stars, planets, and humanity in the final transformation but exclude the "dumb animals, plants, and minerals, and all mixed bodies" due to their corruptibility and lack of spirit (1947, 3.91.5). Aquinas' specific grouping highlights the potential for misinterpretation when using ambiguous language.

Paul Carr contends that "Teilhard believed in spiritual evolution as well as material evolution" (2005, 736), which culminates in a "detach[ment] of the mind, fulfilled at last, from its material matrix, so that it will henceforth rest with all its weight on God-Omega" (Teilhard 1961, 287; in Carr 2005, 736). The detachment of the mind from the material aligns with Santmire's interpretation of the abolition of nature in the final transformation.

David Grumett subscribes to the detachment theory as well, specifying that "Humankind's spiritual component will become detached from the planet Earth and unified with the Omega point" (2007, 530). Grumett uses language that more explicitly excludes planet Earth from the final

transformations than Teilhard's use of "material matrix." Grumett further explains that the evolution of the universe converges on Omega point (2007, 530), which suggests a teleological purpose for the nonspiritual aspects of the universe. Restated, the living world exists as part of the evolutionary process to the Omega point, at which time the living world will be left behind. Through this example, Grumett presents the role of the living world as purely utilitarian to support the evolution toward Omega point. This is reminiscent of Johnson's view the subordinate role that Teilhard ascribes for the living world.

Contrary to this viewpoint, earlier in the essay, Grumett explains that for Teilhard, the purpose of incarnation is "the redemption of the whole cosmos" (2007, 527), which could imply the inclusion of the living world. Either this is a contradictory statement to the detachment theory, or when read in combination with the utilitarian argument, the cosmos could be considered redeemed through its value in the evolutionary process. Though Grumett subscribes to the detachment theory, there is ambiguity as to whether the living world is included in the final transformation. This highlights the potential uncertainty that can stem from examining writings that require extension.

Within the current landscape of ecological eschatology, the interpretations of the final transformation of the living world range from definitively included, to ambiguously unclear, to definitively excluded. These positions are decidedly irreconcilable and could be caused by the ambiguity of Teilhard's language. Francisco J. Ayala suggests that Teilhard's use of analogy, poetic language, neologisms, and multivalent words could contribute to different interpretations of his work (1972, 207). The next section provides an examination of one of the potential sources of ambiguity: the multivalence of *nature*.

#### MULTIFACETED MEANINGS OF NATURE

Arthur O. Lovejoy describes *nature* as "the most pregnant word" with such great multiplicity of meanings that it is "easy, and common, to slip more or less insensibly from one connotation to another, and thus in the end to pass from one ethical or aesthetic standard to its very antithesis, while nominally professing the same principles" (1948, 444). Misinterpretation is the implied risk of using multivalent words and can be so extreme as to prove the opposite point.

A qualitative analysis of Teilhard's works was performed and more than a thousand instances of *nature* were found (1965a, 1965b, 1966a, 1966b, 1968b, 1968c, 1969, 1970, 1971, [1975] 2002, 1978, 2004, 2008). Table 1 contains a summary of the number of times *nature* appears in each of Teilhard's spiritual works. The count is rounded to the nearest five to reflect the approximate precision of this exploratory study.

**Table 1.** Count of *Nature* in Teilhard's spiritual works

Spiritual works	Count of <i>Nature</i> <sup>a</sup>	Number of pages	Edition year
Activation of Energy	120	406	1970
Appearance of Man	70	273	1965a
Christianity and Evolution	95	245	1971
Divine Milieu	45	155	1965b
Future of Man	115	312	2004
Heart of Matter	60	239	1978
Human Energy	90	181	1969
Man's Place in Nature	35	121	1966a
Phenomenon of Man	130	313	2008
Science and Christ	85	223	1968b
Toward the Future	55	215	[1975] 2002
Vision of the Past	120	273	1966b
Writings in Time of War	130	302	1968c

<sup>a</sup>Count rounded to nearest 5.

Each instance was reviewed and coded, and 13 distinct themes were found that were grouped into five larger categories. Teilhard's use of *nature* can be categorized in five ways: as an inherent way of being, as all that is not artificial, as sacred, as an object, and as an abstract concept. Within the categories, there are 13 distinct definitions, which are sometimes contradictory.

#### *Nature as an Inherent Way of Being*

Nearly half of the instances of *nature* describe an aspect of personality or an inherent way of being. Teilhard explains, "By more urgently and more precisely realizing in our thoughts how deeply our nature is rooted in the bowels of the earth, we shall attain a grander idea of the organic unity of the Universe" (1965a, 56). As a phenomenologist, it is expected that Teilhard would regularly describe "the nature of" (2008, 241) a subject. There is often an adjoining adjective or possessive pronoun to emphasize a particular aspect of the personality, such as "biological nature" (1966a, 85), "Christic nature" ([1975] 2002, 198), "spiritual nature" (1965a, 74), "religious nature" (1965a, 108), or "my nature" (1978, 40), making this definition easy to identify.

#### *Nature as All That Is Not Artificial*

The second most common use of *nature* in Teilhard's essays describes all that is not artificial, delineating between "what the laboratory shows us, and then what nature does" (1968c, 25). In an editor's note, *nature* is



defined as organic, “as opposed not to ‘supernatural’ but to ‘superficial, artificial, or simply moral’” (1968c, 171). Explaining *nature* as organic and not artificial is inclusive of all creation, including the creature called human. Teilhard explains, “Man is nothing but the point of emergence in nature, at which this deep cosmic evolution culminates and declares itself” (1969, 23). James Nash shares this definition of *nature* as, “the biophysical world, of which humans are parts and products” (1991, 22).

Although there are hundreds of instances where *nature* represents all creation, there are two contrary definitions, when *nature* excludes humanity and when *nature* includes works of humanity. Despite being critiqued for his anthropocentric focus, Teilhard consistently defines humanity within *nature* (Berry 1982, 4; Santmire 1985; Edwards 2006, 93, 159). The rare instance where Teilhard suggests humanity is outside of *nature* is when he expounds on humanity’s heightened consciousness, “We know the history of his bones: but no ordered place has yet been found in nature for his reflective intelligence” (1971, 104). In this quotation, an aspect of humanity is separated from *nature*.

In *Vision of the Past*, Teilhard uses communication networks, telephone lines, postal routes, and air travel to explain how humanity has advanced in consciousness and created the *noosphere*. Rather than removing humanity from *nature*, he extends *nature* to include artificial creations of humanity as part of the evolutive process toward unity. He explains, “Because we have assumed in principle that the artificial has nothing natural about it (that is to say because we have not seen that artifice is nature humanized), that we fail to recognize vital analogies as clear as that of the bird and the aeroplane, the fish and the submarine” (1966b, 59). Santmire shares this definition of *nature*, explaining that in addition to all creation, *nature* includes “the material and vital products of human creativity, such as gardens or buildings” (1985, 11).

### *Nature as Sacred*

Although most of Teilhard’s books are peppered with a variety of meanings of *nature*, the books *Appearance of Man* and *Man’s Place in Nature* use only the first two definitions *an inherent way of being* and *that which is not artificial*. In the *Future of Man*, capitalization is used to distinguish the difference between the *nature of something* and *Nature* as a forceful entity, such as, “The stars are essentially laboratories in which Nature, starting with primordial hydrogen, manufactures atoms” (2004 102). Capitalization can signify a personified *nature* with human features, as Teilhard explains, “I have always loved and sought to read the face of Nature” (1978, 198). This introduces the third category of *nature* as that which is sacred. “A sense of the universe, a sense of the *all*, the nostalgia that seizes us when confronted by nature, beauty, music—these seem to be an

expectation and awareness of a Great Presence" (2008, 266). God is present in the sacredness of nature. Christ, too, is present in *nature* as "the position of Omega in the heaven of our universe (and this is perfectly possible, since, structurally, Omega is super-personal in nature)" (1968b, 166).

Teilhard's figurative language can suggest the deification of *nature*. He explains, "Mighty nature is at work for us; she has made it her business to look to the future" (1968c, 31). Not only personified but powerful, the deified *nature* makes laws and entertains the pleas of humanity. Teilhard states, "Christ is born without any violation of nature's laws" (1968c, 246), suggesting that there are laws of *nature*. He explains, "Either nature is closed to our demands for futurity... Or else an opening exists—that of the super-soul above our souls" (2008, 232), suggesting that humanity makes demands of nature about the future. This perceived deification is an example of how Teilhard's preference for poetic language can confuse his meaning, as he devotes many pages to the difference between his views and pantheism, namely that God can be seen *throughout* the living world, not that God *is* the living world.

### *Nature as an Object*

A sharp turn from the deification of *nature*, in the fourth category Teilhard defines *nature* as an object. Teilhard adopts varying levels of objectifying *nature*, from a way to find God, to a phenomenon to study, to a puzzle to solve, to a thing to master.

As a tool to find God, he explains "In the vast unknown of nature he will strive to hear the heartbeats of the higher reality which calls him by name" (1968c, 119). In this context, humanity is connected to *nature* because it contains spirit; humanity can sense "deep within ourselves, an 'interior' at the heart of beings....existing everywhere in nature from all time" (2008, 56).

As a phenomenon to study, he explains, "Simply because ... in the Nature that surrounds us, research is the form in which the creative power of God is hidden and operates the most intensely" (1968b, 201). Teilhard uses "the science of nature" (2008, 178) and the "exploration of nature" (1968b, 145) as a way for humanity to engage with the living world, still showing respect for its inherent value.

As a puzzle to solve, it is *nature's* duty to provide mysteries with its infinite resources. He states, "To satisfy us, Nature must continually represent for us a reservoir of discoveries from which we can at every moment expect something completely new to emerge" (1968b, 176).

As an object to master, Teilhard explains, "The time has now come to master nature, to make it unlock its secrets, to dominate it, to inaugurate a new phase" (1968c, 34). Showing further control over nature, he writes,

**Table 2.** Categories and definitions of *Nature*

Category	Definition/themes
An inherent way of being All that is not artificial	A personality trait All creation including humanity All creation including human works All creation excluding humanity
Sacred	An image of God A deity
An object	A means to find God A phenomenon to study A puzzle to explore A thing to master
An abstract concept	An abstract concept A verb As a companion

“By thus allowing nature to take a further step forward it at least achieves a result that is worth the work put into it” (1968c, 65). Like a younger brother or sister, Teilhard explains that in order to bring about the final transformation, the living world needs to be directed for its own good. Highlighting the polarity of definitions for *nature*, the domination of *nature* is much less respectful than the divinity of *nature* or *nature* as a means to find God.

#### *Nature as an Abstract Concept*

In the final category, *nature* is defined in the abstract, as a concept, a verb, and a timeless companion. Alongside truth, Teilhard explains, “What conclusion can we reach except that physics, chemistry and astronomy are contributing their most valuable speculative results to a purpose, required by both nature and truth” (1966b, 112).

As a verb, *nature* is described as “the equivalent of ‘becoming’” (2004, 3), presenting a dynamic phenomenon, constantly in motion. Finally, *Nature* is a timeless companion of humanity, an inspiration, and a friend, as Teilhard explains, “So long as he feels lost and isolated in the mass of things man has every reason to feel disturbed about himself. But once he discovers that his fate is linked with that of nature herself, then he should leap joyfully forward” (1966b, 172). This abstract understanding represents *nature* as permanently intertwined with humanity, providing a source of inspiration and hope.

Summarized in Table 2, Teilhard describes *nature* in 13 ways throughout the five categories: a personality trait, a combination of all creation: including humanity, including human works, and excluding humanity, an image of God, a deity, a means to find God, a phenomenon to study, a

puzzle to explore, a thing to master, an abstract concept, a verb, and as a companion.

*On the Nature of Translation*

To ensure that the multiple uses of *nature* occur in the original French documents and are not a product of translation, a comparison was performed for all entries of *nature* between the French article “Le Phénomène Humain” and the English translation “The Phenomenon of Man” (Teilhard 1930, 390–406; Teilhard 1968b, 86–97). The results of the analysis confirm that the multivalent meanings of *nature* are as apparent in French as in English. The only notable differences between the two essays are that a word other than *nature* is used in one instance: “généralité” (1930, 400), and capitalization is used more frequently in French than in English.

In French, the difference between the first definition of *nature* as *an inherent way of being* and all other definitions is more clearly defined through capitalization. When abstract, personified, or representing all creation, “la Nature” (Teilhard 1930, 392, 393, 396, 404, 406) is capitalized, whereas when used as an aspect of personality, “la nature” (1930, 392, 405) is not capitalized. Although this helps to distinguish one category from the other categories, it is still necessary to parse which meaning of the capitalized form of *Nature* is appropriate in a given context. Ultimately, the use of capitalization does not clarify the overall message.

This analysis was repeated with a shorter comparison using a different document to confirm that the findings are not unique to the selected essay. The following passage from *Le Phénomène Humain* was used: “Prééminente signification de l’Homme dans la Nature, et nature organique de l’Humanité” (Teilhard 1956, 23). The corresponding English translation in *the Phenomenon of Man* was used for confirmation: “The pre-eminent significance of man in nature, and the organic nature of mankind” (Teilhard 2008, 30). The term *nature* occurs twice in both passages in corresponding contexts, and as found in the previous essay, there is a difference in the capitalization of *nature* between the two entries in the original French passage but not in the translated English passage. Therefore, the findings are not unique to the previous essay.

By no means exhaustive, this examination confirmed that the multivalent meanings come from Teilhard and not from translators. The next section explores the impacts that can result from assuming a different definition than the intended meaning.

REIMAGINED LANDSCAPE CONSIDERING DIVERSE DEFINITIONS  
OF NATURE

Gordon Kaufman describes the need for precision of language, specifically when using *nature* in order to avoid being “victimized by hidden nu-

ances and unforeseen implications” (1972, 338). To explore the detrimental implications, the following excerpt from *The Hymn of the Universe* was selected:

We always tend to forget that the supernatural is a leaven, a life-principle, not a complete organism. Its purpose is to transform “**nature**<sub>1</sub>”; and it cannot do that apart from the material with which **nature**<sub>2</sub> presents it. (Teilhard 1965c, 113)

### *Permutations of the First Use of Nature*

Applying the 13 definitions of *nature* to the two instances in the excerpt (**nature**<sub>1</sub> and **nature**<sub>2</sub>) produces various possibilities for the final transformation of the living world. If **nature**<sub>1</sub> refers to the *inherent personality trait*, (the most common usage of *nature*), then the quotation can be restated as “The supernatural’s (soul’s) purpose is to transform the traits of the entity it embodies.” If the entities are only human, then the transformation is of the individual personality traits or the overall character of humanity, producing an anthropocentric eschatology that is ambiguous toward the final transformation of the living world. This aligns with the views of Edwards, Berry, and Johnson.

If **nature**<sub>1</sub> is defined as the living world, the resulting meaning is more complex but similarly ambiguous regarding the final transformation of the living world. The quotation is restated as, “The supernatural’s purpose is to transform all but humanity.” Because it is assumed that every eschatology includes humanity in some way, if *only* the living world needs transformation in order for humanity to reach Omega, then the restated quotation implies that the living world must be manipulated for the benefit of humanity. This says nothing of the final transformation of the living world and aligns with the views of Edwards, Berry, and Johnson.

Instead, if **nature**<sub>1</sub> is defined as *all creation*, (the second most common usage of *nature*), then the living world will be transformed along with humanity, aligning with the views of Haughey and Haught. The quotation is restated as, “The supernatural’s purpose is to transform all creation,” which explicitly includes both the living world and humanity in the final transformation.

If **nature**<sub>1</sub> also includes human works, then the final transformation of the living world and humanity is brought about by the participation of humanity. Though this definition is much less common in Teilhard’s essays than the definition *all creation*, it aligns more closely with Teilhard’s writings on the necessity of human participation to reach Omega. The remaining nine definitions of *nature* either do not fit contextually or duplicate the two findings.

*Permutations of Both Uses of Nature*

A complication of using multivalent words twice in one sentence means that the same definition could be intended for both instances or two different definitions could be expected. If both **nature<sub>1</sub>** and **nature<sub>2</sub>** are defined as *all creation*, then the quotation can be restated as, "The supernatural cannot transform apart from the material which all creation presents it." For all creation to be transformed, it must be physically present. In other words, it is humanity's responsibility to ensure that all creation is present to be transformed, necessitating stewardship of the living world.

If **nature<sub>1</sub>** is *an inherent way of being* and **nature<sub>2</sub>** is *all creation*, then the quotation is restated as, "In order to transform innate human character, all creation must be present." There are no additional data to determine the final transformation of the living world (when **nature<sub>1</sub>** is *an inherent way of being*), but with the addition of **nature<sub>2</sub>** as *all creation*, humanity is encouraged to be stewards of the living world to ensure an eventual transformation. Though still anthropocentric, stewardship of the living world is favored over domination of it.

When **nature<sub>2</sub>** is *the representation of God* or deified, then the final transformation of the living world is too ambiguous to define. The quotation is restated as, "It cannot transform nature apart from the matter with which *the God Nature* presents it." This provides no definitive information. However, when this definition of **nature<sub>2</sub>** is combined with **nature<sub>1</sub>** as *all creation*, then the ambiguity diminishes and the living world is included in the final transformation. Thus, the overall meaning of the quotation is more heavily affected by **nature<sub>1</sub>** than by **nature<sub>2</sub>**, though **nature<sub>2</sub>** can alter the meaning.

When **nature<sub>1</sub>** and **nature<sub>2</sub>** are both *all creation*, then humanity has a role in ensuring that all creation is present so that all of the living world (and humanity) is included in the final transformation. Similarly, if **nature<sub>1</sub>** and **nature<sub>2</sub>** are both *all creation including human works*, then the works themselves become an offering to aid the final transformation of the living world and humanity.

In summary, by using different definitions of *nature*, this one excerpt can be interpreted to support that either the living world is definitively included in the final transformation as Haughey and Haught described, or there are not enough data to conclude (an ambiguous response) as Edwards, Berry, and Johnson described. The substitution of the 13 definitions in the passage was not able to reproduce Santmire's assertion that Teilhard definitively does not include the living world in the final transformation, though this is only one excerpt.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The multivalent natures of nature in Teilhard's essays produce different interpretations of his eschatology. Teilhard describes *nature* as an inherent way of being, as that which is not artificial, as sacred, as an object, and as an abstract concept. This linguistic ambiguity produces a diverse range of interpretations of Teilhard's ecological eschatology. Theologians interpret Teilhard's estimation of the final transformation of the living world as: (1) definitively included, (2) unclear with varying levels of ambiguity, or (3) definitively excluded. An examination of one eschatological passage using the lenses of the 13 different definitions for *nature* reproduced two of the interpretations of the final transformation of the living world: definite inclusion and ambiguity.

If the impact of changing the meaning of one word alters a theologian's entire ecological eschatology, it is especially necessary to consider the imprecision of language when analyzing a text. Though admittedly, there are different expectations for precision in texts that discuss theology than in texts that discuss science.

The term *nature* is especially significant in the context of ecological theology due to its repeated use and varying definitions. This analysis on the ambiguity of language and the impact on the resulting theological interpretations could be expanded to consider the implications of exchanging synonyms for the living world, such as the world, earth, planet, universe, cosmos, and nature, particularly when considering writings by Teilhard. Though the focus of this article is on Teilhard's use of *nature*, this article contributes more broadly to develop the concept of *nature* in the greater theological context.

## NOTE

1. Note on the exclusivity of language: to be consistent with the English translations of the text, inclusive language is not used within the quotations.

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