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## A TRULY HOLISTIC CONCEPTION OF NATURE

In my lecture at the fourth In100Y-seminar in January 2012 I tried to argue that nothing short of a completely all-inclusive conception of nature can be made consistent and adequate for thinking about sustainability. In this conception everything, absolutely everything, has a nature and a place in nature. We cannot name anything without thereby regarding it as having a nature of its own and as member of the species and genera that it belongs to. I have my own nature, and I exemplify human, mammal and perhaps even rational nature. In a comprehensive conception, my nature is all that is true about me, all that can happen to me, and all that I can do. And so it is with all other things in the universe.

Nature in general, the nature that everything has a place in, simply is the way all natures fit perfectly together. Nature is the all-encompassing totality, not regarded as a mere sum or a very, very long list, but as the dynamic interconnectedness from which items can be singled out by certain other items like me and you. This is the only conception of nature that is truly holistic, and – I would add – truly consistent and sober-minded.

Nonetheless, this conception of nature is neither the only nor the dominant one. We normally use the word ‘nature’ in a contrasting rather than a comprehensive sense. In daily life we tend to think of nature as that which is more or less unaffected by human interference such as the wild as opposed to the cultivated, the rural as opposed to the urban, or the organic as opposed to the synthetic. We may also regard nature as the material or physical as opposed to the mental, the abstract, the ideal or the normative. From a religious point of view we may regard all of this as natural in the sense of the earthly and secular as opposed to the divine and eternal.

It is all of these more common contrasting conceptions of nature that we have to free ourselves from if we are to begin to understand all of human nature as fully

integrated with the nature of everything else. We should start stopping ourselves whenever we think of humans as somehow above, below or otherwise outside of nature, and we should start to stop ourselves when we think of nature as anything less than the whole. It is crucial that we begin to understand that the world as it unfolds can be divided up in many ways, but that no part of the whole could be more natural than the whole itself in the sense of being more original or basic.

We should also start stopping ourselves when we think that we are about to destroy nature or that it is up to us to save or care for nature. Nature is indestructible. Local developments may undermine themselves and thus be unsustainable, but Nature as such is always sustainable.

It is crucial that we realize that we have the best of reasons to diminish the careless pollution of the atmosphere and the oceans, to leave substantial areas of the surface of the earth in a wild condition, to control the growth of our cities, to encourage a shift in the use of scientific knowledge, to develop new forms of science taking all of human nature into account, and to remind ourselves that we have not created the world, whether or not we believe that a deity has done so. We should exhibit cosmic modesty. We are neither lords nor stewards of nature. We are parts of the whole, and all we do always fits immediately into all else that happens. We must keep trying as best we can to learn from our mistakes and try to be decent and responsible persons, because we and everything else is going to live and die, exist and perish, both with the foreseen and the unforeseen consequences of all that we do as the parts of nature we are.

*Read Hans Fink's full lecture, including the five other conceptions of nature, at [www.in100y.dk/cph-seminars/4-its-our/from-the-seminar/](http://www.in100y.dk/cph-seminars/4-its-our/from-the-seminar/)*