

# The Environmental Impact of Nothing

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## Abstract

This paper explores the philosophical concept of nothing as it relates to the human understanding of the environment. Conceiving of nature as “nothing,” that which has no meaning, or that which is pure body, disconnected from mind or spirit, allows for nature’s degradation and for a nihilistic view of the world—since nature itself has no inherent value. The paper provides a broad intellectual history of the idea of “nothing” in relation to the environment, including treatments of the philosophers and literary figures: Augustine, Descartes, Camus, Tolstoy, Nietzsche and Heidegger.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, Heidegger, Descartes, Environmental, Impact, nothing

There are two kinds of nothing that have a dangerous impact on the environment. One stems from dualistic philosophies that treat the outside world as that which has no meaning. Although dualism had been prevalent in Greek philosophy and Christian theology, Descartes built on the idea that nature has no intrinsic value to justify the scientific study and exploitation of nature. After all, why respect nature if it has no metaphysical value? The other kind of nothing is the one that Tolstoy and Camus wrote about; it arises when the world is divorced both from internal consciousness and from eternal value. When nature has no meaning, it is easy to conclude that life itself has no meaning. When life has no meaning, it does not matter if you throw away your can of coke or recycle it. Nietzsche and Heidegger brought attention to western man's corrupted view of nature and can be considered pioneers in environmental philosophy.

Over the past thirty years, it has become increasingly difficult to ignore the consequences both kinds of nothing have had on our environment. The beliefs that nature is an exploitable nothing and that life has no meaning have justified and perpetuated the trashing of our planet. What followed from Descartes scientific revolution was the industrial revolution, a harbinger of ever more intrusive technologies, like factories and cars that sent pollutants into the earth's air, land, and sea. Now we face consequences of global warming like draughts, more extreme weather, the melting of the polar ice caps, and rising sea levels. It is increasingly difficult to believe that we can exploit nature without feeling the negative effects. It seems that never before has our connection with nature been more strongly proven. Perhaps environmentalism is the thread that can restore a connection to the universe for those who otherwise believe in nothing.

## Stripping Nature of Meaning:

In his Discourse on Method, Rene Descartes formulated the idea that nature is disconnected from man in modern and *rational* terms. By doubting existence

outside of his consciousness, Descartes reasoned, "intelligent nature is distinct from corporal nature" (Descartes 27). Since God's nature is perfect and of the intelligent variety, that meant that corporal matter is that which lacks god's presence.

Of course, the dualistic concept that matter lacks the essence of God is not original to Descartes. It is an idea, which was propounded by the Socratics and brought into Christian thought by Augustine. Compare Augustine's concept of the origin of sin, "You made the man but not the sin in him" (Augustine 8) to Descartes', "Though we often have ideas which contain falsity, they can only be those ideas which contain some confusions and obscurity, in which respect they 'do not come from the supreme Being, but proceed from or participate in nothingness" (Descartes 29). So why didn't we see the same level of environmental devastation in Augustine's era as now?

In justifying his publication of his principles, Descartes also wrote, "Instead of the speculative philosophy now taught in the schools we can find a practical one" and justified using knowledge of nature to "make ourselves master and possessors of nature" (Descartes 45). Descartes takes the idea that nature has no meaning out of the realm of speculation and thrusts it into the realm of action. Descartes writings in the seventeenth century had an enormous impact on the scientific revolution and the subsequent industrial revolution. It seems no accident that the popular concept that nature is an exploitable nothing, along with advances in technology, made an unprecedented exploitation of the environment possible.

The incipient stages of modern day air pollution started with the introduction of factories and widespread consumption of coal when, "virtually no one reckoned that burning coal or oil would tamper with our climate" (Henson 27). By adding carbon dioxide to the Earth's atmosphere over the past 150 years, humans have altered the world's climate (Henson 7). "After the mid-1800s, Earth's climate took a decided turn for the warmer and by the end of the twentieth century it was clear that global temperatures had reached the highest temperatures seen in 1000 years" (Henson 216). The IPCC's 2001 report break global emissions of carbon dioxide into four major sectors: Industry, Buildings, Transportation, and Agriculture. These industries would not exist if it had not been for the industrial and scientific revolutions. Dualism provided a philosophical justification for the *objective* study and the exploitation of nature.

### **The Impact of Nihilism:**

Descartes explained the presence of God *rationaly*, but for thinkers who could not find higher meaning, the dualistic philosophy descended into cosmic and existential nihilism. Cosmic nihilism is related to dualism in that it denies the

possibility of finding meaning in nature, "The cosmos is seen as giving no support to distinctively human aims or values" (Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy). When people believe that the world is alien to human value, the meaning of actions in the world comes into question as well. This view that life itself has no meaning is existential nihilism or, that which "negates the meaning of human life, judging it to be irremediably pointless, futile and absurd" (Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Both kinds of nihilism are dangerous for the environment. For a cosmic nihilist hog farmer, it does not matter if his hogwash flows into a local river because the river has no inherent value. For an existential nihilist, there is no point in trying to clean up a planet from which she will inevitably and eternally depart.

Albert Camus lays out his version of nihilism, called absurdism, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus presumes that nature lacks meaning and reasons that life must lack meaning too, "The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness" (Camus 60). Although Camus presents a rather bleak view of the universe, he did leave a little bit of room for the possibility of finding meaning.

The absurd grew out of the destruction and exigency of World War I to declare "None of all this has any meaning" (Camus 117). Camus was concerned with the futility of impermanent art and mortality, "To work and create 'for nothing,' to sculpture in clay, to know that one's creation has no future, to see one's work destroyed in a day while being aware that fundamentally this has no more importance than building for centuries--this is the difficult wisdom that absurd thought sanctions" (Camus 114). The anxiety we experience now is not that our creations are fleeting but that the materials we use will take untold centuries to decompose. The philosophy that we need now is not one that proclaims a divorce between man and the world but one that binds them again.

Absurd living does not promote unlawful behavior but "confers an equivalence on the consequences of those actions" (Camus 67). In the world where human behavior has a tangible effect on the environment and the environment is known to bite back, it is no longer possible to say that all actions bare equal consequences. If you bike to work rather than driving, you will be sending less carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. If everyone biked to work rather than drove, there would be that much less pollution and that much more potential for a stabilized climate.

Although Camus philosophy of the absurd hinges upon a belief that the world lacks meaning, he does mention the possibility of a "means to proceed beyond nihilism" (Camus v). Though the absurd man knows that there is no meaning in the universe he still tries to recover a logical path back to unity with the world, "In this ravaged world in which the impossibility of knowledge is

established, in which ever-lasting nothingness seems the only reality and irremediable despair seems the only attitude, he tries to recover the Ariadne's thread that leads to divine secrets" (Camus 67). Perhaps Camus would consider environmentalism to be that thread to universality.

Camus wrote of his interest in basing his arguments on the evidence given in the world, "My reasoning wants to be faithful to the evidence that aroused it. That evidence is the absurd. It is that divorce between the mind and desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together" (Camus 50). Global warming provides the evidence that we are indeed unified with our world. When humans pollute the air, the temperature increases and humans suffer. Although the temperature has only increased by a few degrees on average, in the summer of 2003, more than 20,000 Europeans died because of the higher heat (Hensen 46). It does not seem that we can continue to pollute the environment at the rate we are going without suffering the consequences.

Camus conceded that the relationship between man and the universe might be reconciled if the universe could love and suffer like man. If you define the universe as everything which is outside the realm of man, as I think Camus does, that definition would include nature, ecology, animals, agriculture, and the weather. Although Camus refers to the special kind of suffering that man has, because he is aware of his pain; the primary definition of *suffer* includes a mix of anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric meanings "To have (something painful, distressing, or injurious) inflicted or imposed upon one; to submit to with pain, distress, or grief, pain, death, punishment, judgment; hardship, disaster; grief, sorrow, care" (OED). Knowing what we do now about the injuries done to Earth as a result of some harmful human technologies like aerosol and CO<sub>2</sub>, it seems valid to say that Earth in a sense suffers. If not the earth, humans certainly suffer as a result of our treatment of the earth.

The language of suffering is prevalent in the discussion of the environmental impact of destructive human behaviors. In "A Climate-Change Primer" headings read, "Will agriculture suffer?" "And Wildlife?" (Henson 13). News sources use language of injury and distress in sections on environmentalism the headline "Tuna in trouble" (Economist)t. A headline for the New York Times reads, "Alexandra Morton, a self-trained biologist, has been battling fish farms in British Columbia that she says are endangering wild salmon runs." (New York Times) The language of suffering personifies nature, kindling in the newspaper's readership a kind of empathy for nature.

If Camus were alive today to witness the tangible effects of environmental damage, would he retain the same opinions about the world? Over the past twenty years, we have witnessed a change in the way nature responds to human technology because it has become more widespread than ever before. The

millions of people who drive to work everyday in Los Angeles send pollutants into the air that they visually perceive as smog and tangibly feel as air temperatures increase. The rising temperatures along with the resultant draught are contributing factors to the wave of wildfires that is currently plaguing southern California (Los Angeles Times). This is just one example of the ways in which humans have become a meteorological force. Even if the earth has not *suffered*, strictly speaking, humans certainly have. The evidence that demonstrates the connection between man and nature challenges Camus's assumption that nature is inaccessible.

The nihilistic attitude can be summed up in Leo Tolstoy's beautiful lines, "There is nothing in life, there never was and never will be...If not today, then tomorrow sickness and death will come to everyone, to me, and nothing will remain except the stench and the worms. My deeds, whatever they may be, will be forgotten sooner or later, and I myself will be no more." (Tolstoy 30). Tolstoy's concern with the ultimate lack of meaning available for mortal beings led him to a dangerous conclusion, "Why, then, do anything?" (Tolstoy 30). If each individual in a society agrees with such an attitude, environmental damage is both caused and perpetuated. Environmental awareness arouses individual responsibility. The movement calls on all people to recycle, drive fuel-efficient cars, reuse materials, and unplug appliances when not in use. To be an environmentalist is to restore meaning to everyday actions, objects, and ecosystems.

### **Restoring Meaning to Nature:**

Friedrich Nietzsche's definition of nihilism as a progression from an awareness of a separation between consciousness and the world to a disbelief in the world, suggests that the recovery of meaning is inherently tied to the renewal of belief in the reality of the world. In his notes, published in the *Will to Power*, Nietzsche defines nihilism as "the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability" (Nietzsche 7). Nietzsche anticipated the dangerous significance of doubting the reality of the world saying, "As soon as man finds out how the world is fabricated solely from psychological needs, and how he has absolutely no right to it, the last form of nihilism comes into being; it includes disbelief in any metaphysical world and forbids itself any belief in a true world" (Nietzsche 13). Nietzsche wrote that we projected values onto the world like "aim, unity, and being" which we've pulled out again so the "world looks valueless" (Nietzsche 13). He was aware of the environmental damage that stems from such disbelief in the world, "We no longer collect, we squander the capital of our ancestors" (Nietzsche 44). Nietzsche's repudiation of nihilism can be seen as a kind of precursor to environmental philosophy in the sense that it prescribes the reintroduction of meaning into the world.

In the article "The Metaphysics of Nature," Rich Grego dubs Martin Heidegger the father of environmental philosophy because he argued that we must reclaim nature as something with meaning. Heidegger criticized Plato and Aristotle for originating philosophy as a method to explain the natural world rationally rather than to exclaim the mysterious experience of Being in nature, "This made any deep appreciation for Being of nature impossible, and led to the progressive alienation of humanity from nature in Western thought and culture" (Grego 9). In Heidegger's view, the development of science and technology in the modern post-enlightenment world are expressions of the alienation between humans and nature, "Science and technology have turned the natural world into an object of empirical study and commercial exploitation" (Grego 9). Heidegger challenged the long-held view that nature has no inherent value except to fulfill man's needs and proposed a new way to look at nature.

In Heidegger's view, nature is something that must be "accepted and submitted to" as "a sacred incarnation of Being" (Grego 10). Humanity becomes alienated from the world when nature has no deep meaning except to serve scientific investigation or commercial exploitation. Our destruction of the environment is symptomatic of our spiritual alienation from a source of meaning. (Grego 10) "The only hope for an authentic encounter with nature (Being) involves appreciating it in freedom--which means letting it be rather than trying to change or improve it" (Grego 11). Heidegger's reexamination of western philosophy's dualism inspired a new wave of environmental philosophers to find ethical reasons for protecting the planet.

From the introduction of metaphysical inquiry to modern philosophy and sciences, the belief that nature lacks value has had consequences on the way people treat the environment and interpret their lives. For those in the modern era who do not believe in God or in a teleological structure of the universe, the idea that matter lacks meaning leaves human life void of meaning. For human bodies, like matter, are temporal. The arrival of scientific inquiry brought about new technologies that were capable of exploiting natural resources for human gain. Today we face disasters of all kinds as a result of that exploitation. The onslaught of global climate change not only demonstrates that there is an inherent value in treating the Earth well, but it could also restore a sense of connection to the natural world for would be nihilists.

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