LIMITS OF NATURALISM:
PLASTICITY, FINITUDE AND THE IMAGINATION

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that the two primary features defining human beings are their finitude and plasticity and that this is the consequence that human beings live in a world which is constantly changing, hence historical. This means that the relationship between humans and their world is constantly changing and hence that relationship cannot be understood in a simple naturalistic fashion. Not only is there no 'innocence of language', but humanity relates to the world in a variety of ways ranging from prose to poetry to art and music. It is the continuous creation of this multiplicity of approaches to the world as the product of historical dynamism which constitutes the real meaning of naturalism.

KEYWORDS: Naturalism; Imagination; Science; Art

Can the world be understood as nature or as something natural? If so, such a premise often produces the idea or belief that human beings are part of nature, namely something which exists independent from the sentient subject. What does such a statement mean?

The postulation that the world and human beings are part of the ontological and phenomenological realm of the 'natural' is founded on the idea of the existence of an ontic reality referred to as 'nature'. But is nature itself an entity *in se et per se* as metaphysical naturalism purports? Or is it something which has been created or constructed by human beings, something which has its origins in human behaviour (methodological naturalism)? And if the world is mere metaphor, as some would have it, what happens to the concept of 'nature' and the category of the 'natural'? This conceptual and aesthetic conundrum is the inherent product of that phenomenon known as the 'innocence of language'. If there is an innocence of language then this Cartesian *res extensa*, which we call 'nature', should be understood in the same way by

all human beings irrespective of their experience and culture. However, in reality, the conceptualisation of 'nature' and the 'natural' is the product of a 'cultivated experience', which we call culture. Every culture has a specific understanding of what 'nature' and the 'natural' are. This can be seen quite clearly in the different routes taken during the years after c. 500 BCE in China, India, Mesopotamia and Greece, in what has been termed the Axial Age.[1]

In many ways the major puzzle appears to be represented by the lingering and niggling doubt that there is no 'innocence of language'; that the gift of language is not in harmony with the world which it describes and that, in many cases, language itself is endowed with an autonomous capacity, which produces a fictitious world of conventional and arbitrary correspondences between word and things, signifieds and signifiers. It is through language that the *res cogitans* is connected or separated from the *res extensa*. Whether *physis* reflects *logos* and vice-versa is an old question, a dichotomy which apparently represents the foundation of a conceptual and historical fiction known as 'Western Civilisation'. Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* captures the inherent and persisting dichotomy characterising occidental thought and epistemologies.[2]

The disharmony between language and the world, however, would only be an enigma if human beings inhabited a tridimensional universe of a rather simple structure. Once change over time occurs, once the Parmenidean world of being evolves into the Heraclitean world of becoming, it loses its primeval innocence and simplicity and becomes complex and messy; that messiness is what we, at least in the West, understand as 'history', and human beings are as much historical beings as they are natural ones. Human beings are not simple but complex entities.

That the same human being can hold two different views or perspectives of the world becomes evident when considering the physiological-psychological differences between the left side and the right side of the brain, and how each side comes to relate to, and know, the world.[3] The left hand side makes use of speech, while the right hand side grasps the world in quite a different fashion. That it is 'natural' for human beings to relate to the world in a number of ways, poses major problems for those who would seem to think that language is the primary means through which human beings

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[1] For a recent discussion of the Axial Age see Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Palaeolithic to the Axial Age*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011) and Robert N. Bellah & Hans Joas (Eds.), *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[2] For an analysis of Plato's *Cratylus* see H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London: Continuum, 2004 [1975]), 406-417.

[3] I. McGilchrist, *The Master and the Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

interact with their world. One must ask: why did 'nature' provide us with such a variety of ways or modes to approach the world?

We come to know and describe the world through a variety of means: pictorial, music, language, mathematics. Even when we come to use language we have a number of possible genres or modes under which language can operate to describe reality. There is a difference between songs and poems, stories and works of analysis. It is always worth reflecting on why poetry comes before prose in the historical record. Early Greek philosophers, in fact, expounded their ontological and cosmological theories in poetry and not in prose. See, for instance, Parmenides of Elea's extant fragments of his *Peri Physeōs* (On Nature) or Hesiod of Askra's *Theogonia* (Genealogy of the Gods). Reason expressed itself in verse just like the Homeric epos. As Nietzsche states,

> The poet presents his thought in splendour, on the wagon of rhythm – usually because they cannot go on foot.[4]

Prose is the tool of choice of the left side of the brain as it seeks to fit the world into its conceptual and grammatical structures, to reduce messiness to structure and to order. But prose is artifice: it generates fiction by separating language and the world. So logic and reason produce fantasy, the imaginary, and therefore have nothing to do with reality. As Parmenides himself claims,

> Here I cease for you the warranted account and thought
> About the truth. Henceforward learn mortal opinions,
> Listening to the deceitful arrangements of my words.
> For they determined in their minds to name two forms,
> One of which they should not - and that is where they have erred.
> And they distinguished them as opposite in kind and set up signs
> For them separately from one another (…)[5]

As mentioned earlier, it is also worth considering why the paths chosen by different cultures and those fictions, known as 'civilisations', during the Axial Age varied in the way that they did. The different routes and directions they undertook largely depended on the way they posited the relationship between man, God and the world, a relationship which they articulated and resolved in a purely linguistic context: the different hermeneutics they developed represented the key to understand those

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[4] F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. M. Faber & S. Lehmann, (London: Penguin, 1984), Section 4, aphorism 189, p. 120.

[5] Diels-Kranz frag. 28 B 8.50- 57 in H. Diels & W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, vol. I, (Hildesheim: Weidmann, 1952). Emphasis added. For the separation of Being (truth) and *Doxa* (opinion), see the article by H. Schwabl, 'Sein und Doxa bei Parmenides', *Wiener Studien*, 66 (1953) 50–75.

relations, and language is the channel and milieu of hermeneutic experience.[6] This is not to endorse a form of relativism, only to argue that any particular mode of knowing is finite and, therefore, limited in what it can tell us about the world. If the goal is completeness or 'universality', the problem is that no road or path can deliver that completeness without doing harm to it, largely by forging at least part of that completeness out of the human imagination.[7] The West, understood as the product of the Enlightenment, believes that its road delivers universality because it provides human beings with the power to do things to alter the world. That power, however gratifying, should not be confused with universal understanding, which it is not. In fact, the increasing power which this way provides may be an indication of its movement away from reality and a narrowing of its capacity to understand the world. To conquer is not to understand. To conceive of non-Western roads as simply stages, beyond which the West has progressed on the way to universality, is an illusion. Those are roads not taken, understandings rejected in the quest for increased power.

Could it also be the case that the form naturalism takes when considered as a mode of human understanding is largely a consequence of the fact that it is the product of a particular form of linguistic prose, which tends to close off the possibility of theism. How does one, for example, 'prove' the existence of God through language although God is posited as the 'Word' par excellence? The structure of prose may be such that it will always defeat such an endeavour. Poetry may be a far better means of so doing, music even better, and silence the best means of all. The prohibition of speaking the name of God is far from being merely a taboo: it rather testifies to the inexpressibility of God through language and to the danger inherent in language, which fictionalises reality and closes off the possibility of truth. Another example is the way in which the universe may be capable of being described mathematically, but when we come to language we are forced to resort to metaphor or metonymy, namely means of contiguity and similarity, as in our description of such things as atoms. And still there are realities which elude both metaphorical and metonymical descriptions, such as the 'Black Holes' or that fraction of a second before the Big Bang, just like God. Probably these are probably the 'places' of God.

Hence we need to accept the finitude and necessarily limited nature of the various means through which we come to apprehend the world. Philosophical analysis will enable us to look at, and grasp, the world in a particular way. The problem comes when we mistake that mode of understanding for universalism, as if it gathered up all

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[6] H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 284–404.

[7] The creative power of the imagination has also been acknowledged as an important factor in scientific discoveries by Karl Popper. See K. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, (London/New York: Routledge, [1935], 2002), 8-9; p. 56 n2.

the other modes of understanding together, thereby transcending and fulfilling them. This is the vanity of any mode which lays claim to be the 'Queen of the Sciences.'

Such a universalism assumes that human beings are capable of achieving a 'God like' capacity to view and understand the world, of defeating forever the limitations of perspectivism, which hinder the human natural élan to universalism, that same élan which had once led Nietzsche to exclaim,

> What, then, is truth? A manoeuvrable army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms – in short, a summation of human relationships which have been poetically and rhetorically heightened, transposed, and embellished, and which, after long use by people, are considered to be solid, canonical, and binding: truths are illusions whose true nature has been forgotten."[8]

The attempt to overcome human *perspectivism* is represented by that phenomenon or attitude termed the 'encyclopaedia approach' to knowledge, which aims at gathering all knowledge together, systematizing it and eventually achieving an understanding of the universe which is truly universal, an attitude which was typical of the Enlightenment. In his introduction to the translation of d'Alembert's *Preliminary Discourse*, Schwab argues that d'Alembert believed that his method would provide humanity with the power to independently shape and direct its own destiny.[9] But the *Encyclopaedia* itself was conceived as a boundless project, based on a concept of knowledge, which divided knowledge into distinct domains or spheres, and significantly acknowledged, alongside the branches of Memory (History) and Reason (Philosophy), also that of Imagination (Poetry).

Yet those of us who practice the craft of history know that the encyclopaedic or universal enterprise is delusional. The skills of History include that of conjuring up pictures, which appear to be comprehensive, out of what are essentially a collection of fragments. We may have less than five percent of the pieces of a mosaic but with our imaginations we put them together in such a way as to create the illusion of the whole. What is conjectural comes to possess authority as if it *must* be the case. The idea or *logos* of a 'Universal History' is paradoxically a *mythos*, the *pothos* of universalism the source of *pathos*.

If we consider, in fact, the abstract and 'noumenal' reality of mathematics we discover that there are a whole range of mathematical systems of which that of natural numbers is but one. This is important as it demonstrates how imaginary numbers

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[8] For the limitations and effects of *perspectivism* see F. Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lie in a Morally-Disengaged Sense', in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. W. Kaufmann, (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 46–47.
[9] See: Jean Le Ronde d'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, Translated and with an introduction by R.N Schwab, (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1995).

allow reason to deal with the infinite.[10] 'Natural Numbers' belong to the realm of the finite, of logic. Reason in order to come to terms or engage with the infinite, the borderless space and eternity, must resort to the creativity of imagination. Imagination, in fact, allows human beings to go beyond the limitations of a natural order bounded by the conventions of dull, plodding prose.

In this regard it is worth recalling how Pascal describes the imagination:

> This is that dominant part of man, the mistress of error and falsehood, the more knavish for she is not always so, for she would be an infallible rule of truth, if she were an infallible rule of lying. But being usually false, she gives no indication of her character, stamping the true and the false with the same die.[11]

Human beings cannot avoid using the imagination as they attempt to build the universal out of such fragments of knowledge as are granted to them. In a way it is like constructing Frankenstein's monster out of a collection of body parts and not being able to recognise that simply to put the bits together will never be enough. Only God can breathe life into what is a melange of organs.

Pascal's ideas on the role of imagination can lead to new insights in the context of naturalism in particular the famous 'Pascal's wager'. The wager to either believe or not believe allows reason to *logically* accept the figments of the imagination (or the imaginary) as real. Paradoxically reason *rationalises* the imaginary as much as the imaginary *fictionalises* the products of reason. These often parallel processes sanction the limits of reason and naturalism *tout court*. In this regard, it may be said that the greatest failure of the human intellect lies in its capacity for over-elaboration of any truth or insight into the world. Michael Cook identified this aspect of human nature in the way in which Australian Aborigines weave ever more complex kinship structures.[12] It is something which human beings seem unable to resist, as can be seen in the development of law.

This attitude is caused by that pernicious disease known as academic scholasticism. What begins as a simple insight about the world is taken up, examined, modified and worked over and over. Although such a process undeniably does allow for a somewhat beneficial and greater distillation of the truth of the insight, it however also allows for the growth of ever greater complexity and sophistication, as commentary is poured on

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[10] B.A. Rosenfeld., *A History of Non-Euclidean Geometry: Evolution of the Concept of a Geometric Space*, trans. by A. Shenitzer, (New York: Springer, 1988).

[11] "*C'est cette partie dominante dans l'homme, cette maîtresse d'erreur et de fausseté, et d'autant plus fourbe qu'elle ne l'est pas toujours, car elle serait règle infaillible de vérité si elle l'était infaillible du mensonge. Mais étant le plus souvent fausse, elle ne donne aucune marque de sa qualité, marquant du même caractère le vrai et le faux*". *Pensée 44*, in B. Pascal, *Pensée*, (London; Penguin, 1995).

[12] Michael Cook, *A Brief History of the Human Race*, (New York: Norton, 2005), 63–9.

commentary, minutia are explored and the imagination weaves its webs around what was initially a simple truth or statement of fact. For a long time, in fact, commentary was the characteristic way in which human beings advanced intellectual discussion. This occurs because the human imagination has a great love of adding ever more to the discussion and study of a matter, it cannot resist the desire to make things ever more complex until it has woven structures out of but a few threads of material, with the imagination filling in all the gaps.

This human capacity for weaving and stretching their language has many consequences. One major one is the way in which languages have proceeded down a range of pathways, and every language is always changing and even mutating into a new language. Language has a life of its own: its phonetics, morphology & syntax are apparently natural while its semantics is based on convention and is influenced by the pragmatic context.[13] Fundamentally language is 'political' in the Aristotelian sense, and the *polis*, the place of *nomos*, is the opposite of *physis*.[14]

If 'naturalism' is the way of the world, one would have expected that human beings would possess but a single language and that the real world would simply translate into its structures. Then we would truly have the 'innocence of language'. The origins of the 'confusion of tongues', of Babel, can be explained as having its roots in a 'fallen' human nature.[15] Much as some in the past may have searched for the 'pure' original tongue of humanity, this does not exist simply because there has never been a time when humans were not subject to change. As shall be argued, as the conditions of people change so do the ways in which they attempt to come to terms with those changing conditions. The natural condition of humanity is plasticity. As 'nature' changes so do people, and a nature subject to mutation is a natural consequence of the expulsion of human beings from the Garden of Eden.

That there is no such innocence in our use of language can be seen in the way in which words change their meanings over time, the way in which a word of a particular time and location never really describes the phenomenon when it is belongs to another time and space. In that sense, naturalism is not fixed in nature but also changing. It is a very slippery creature. This becomes especially apparent the more abstract the noun is that we are using. Abstract nouns, which make perfect sense in their original setting, become highly problematic when used in other settings. The classic example of this is the word 'religion', which developed and evolved in a Western pagan, and later Christian, setting but was then transferred to describe phenomena in other

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[13] W.C. Stokoe., 'Language is natural but not automatic', *Semiotica* 113, (1997), pp. 369–383.

[14] See: Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252b 28 -31.

[15] L.R Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom. Reading Genesis*, (New York: Free Press, 2003), 222–239.

settings. 'State', a word coined to denote a particular socio-political reality in the XVI century, is another example of a word, which has been stretched to cover a variety of phenomena. Is a Greek *polis*, for example, a state? The great advantage of using such elastic terms is that it encourages the human capacity for engaging in disputes over the meanings of words in the vain hope or Parsifalian quest for precision, although generally it is the erudite search for such precision rather than its attainment which is relished. It was such things which made Ralph Cudworth throw up his hands in horror:

Cold theorems and maximes, dry and jejune disputes, lean syllogisticall reasonings, could never yet of themselves beget the least glympse of true heavenly light, the least sap of saving knowledge in any heart…Words and syllables, which are but dead things, cannot possibly convey the living notions of heavenly truths to us.[16]

But, it could be argued, the whole point of theology is to deal with 'words and syllables' rather than with the living reality of the spiritual life. It was this subversion of values, the etymological distortion of words and the displacement of truth, which prompted Nietzsche to explore polemically the 'genealogy of morals'. But isn't it such activity which makes us "human, all too human"? As Nietzsche alleges,

The importance of language for the development of culture lies in the fact that, in language, man juxtaposed to the one world another world of his own, a place which he thought so sturdy that from it he could move the rest of the world from its foundations and make himself lord over it. (…)The shaper of language was not so modest as to think that he was only giving things labels; rather, he imagined that he was expressing the highest knowledge of things with words; (…) Logic too, rests on assumptions that do not correspond to anything real in the world, e.g. on the assumption of the equality of things, the identity of the same thing at different points in time; but this science arose from the opposite belief (that there were such things in the real world).[17]

Equally we know that what is said in one language can never be exactly translated into another language. This is because the structure of the language and the way in which words relate to each other, the so-called semantic universe,[18] vary from language to language. Could a meta-language be created which allowed for a neutral, or natural, description of the world? It would be difficult to see how such a language could be

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[16] Ralph Cudworth, *Mr Cudworth's Sermon Preached before the Honourable House of Commons at Westminster, March 31st 1647*, (Cambridge: Tallboys Wheeler, 1852), p. 4.

[17] F. Nietzsche., *Human, All Too Human.*,Section I, Aphorism 11, 18–19.

[18] For the concept of 'semantic universe' see A.J. Greimas, *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

devised, given that it would be very difficult to decide what constituted a 'neutral' structure for such a language.

In a sense such a neutral language exists in the form of mathematics, although again it should be emphasised that mathematics does not constitute a single language but a series of languages, and does not correspond to any experiential or ontic reality. It is for this reason that mathematical languages are context free. The natural number system is the same in all times and places. But mathematics is an exceptionally specialised way of viewing and understanding the world and could hardly be used as the basis for more general human communication.

Is there a naturalistic explanation for this situation? Notwithstanding the perceived absurdity and meaninglessness of the human capacity for multiplying languages and its ensuing problems, there may be an inherent, *deontic logic* in this apparent madness. It may, in fact, be the consequence of the essential way human beings are as natural beings, as nature itself dictates the rules of 'permissibility' and of 'obligatoriness.'[19] If there is an aspect of the world, which appears to be almost axiomatic, it is that human beings are plastic, flexible or fluid, rather than fixed entities when it comes to the means which they use to describe, understand and relate to the world of experience. It is this plasticity which enables them to think and perform a variety of things. These include adapting a natural language as the world around them constantly changes by creating new words, modifying existing ones, by widening their semantic and pragmatic field and shifting the mooring points of meaning by altering the syntax of language. This is a conscious and natural process, as language is the source of cognisant thought and consciousness in general,[20] or, as Parmenides once fittingly argued, "being and thinking is the same thing".[21] It is the plasticity inherent in the nature of human beings, which allows for continuous change and adaptation, thus making the continuation of organic life possible.[22] The advantage of the plasticity of mathematics, of that set of statements or propositions, which Plato referred to as *diánoia* or dianoetic knowledge,[23] has considerable advantages as it allows for

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[19] See in this regard G.H. von Wright, 'Deontic Logic', *Mind*, 60 (1951).

[20] See in this regard R. Jackendoff, 'How language helps us think', *Pragmatics and Cognition*, 4 (1996), pp. 1-24.

[21] Parmenides, fragment 28 B 3, Diels & Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker,* vol. I,

[22] Already the XVII century English philosopher Ralph Cudworth, in his work *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), had argued that it was necessary to suppose the existence of 'plastic natures', namely dynamic forces or energies which could penetrate matter in order to produce movement and change.

[23] Plato, *The Republic*, VII. 526a–526c. *Diánoia* or reason produced 'middle knowledge', which stands between belief (*pístis*) and pure knowledge (*nóesis*). Interestingly it is through the knowledge of mathematical-geometric realities or entities that one moves away from the world of opinion (*dóxa*), namely of imagination (*eikasía*) and belief (*pístis*), towards the world of *nóesis* or pure knowledge.

considerable flexibility in the way in which human beings develop their ideas about the universe. Analogous statements could be made about the various languages of art and music, which operate by means of conventional symbols which have no referent in the world of experience.[24] Consequently plasticity may almost be termed a 'naturalistic' principle, in the Platonic sense, [25] in that it is a central part of the nature of human beings. One can also argue that it comes out of the twin imperatives of finitude and adaptability. Human beings are as they are because of their nature, but that nature does not imply a fixed relationship between the world of experience and human understanding of that world. The semantics and pragmatics of a naturalistic framework must, however, try to explain why human understanding assumes a plastic form; the easiest explanation would be that this is the most apposite form for human nature to take if human beings are to flourish in the universe. Imagination, for all its possible failings, is a central aspect of this plasticity, for without the capacity to imagine there would be little capacity to change and adapt.

If we accept this argument, then it can be said that a naturalistic view of human beings, one which describes their authentic nature, militates against 'naturalism', intended as the adoption of an abstract system as a means of understanding nature, or rather it would recognise that in any adoption of such an abstract naturalism there will always be errors as such a naturalism cannot be created without the creative assistance of the imagination.

Again, the two crucial aspects of human nature are its finitude and its plasticity, not its resemblance to some construct or paradigm to which we give the label 'nature'. Consequently a naturalistic understanding of human nature cannot exclude those aspects of that nature, which go beyond what has normally been understood as naturalism. There are elements of human experience, which, in fact, go beyond the boundaries of 'nature' and which exist as a result or consequence of the plasticity of human beings. These elements can be apprehended by human beings, but are not capable of being expressed by language, especially prose. Conventional naturalists tend to see such expressions of the human mind as necessarily false, because they do not fit their model of nature and its assumption that human beings are evolving away from falsehood and towards truth.

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[24] See in this regard R. Jackendoff, *Patterns in the Mind*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

[25] K. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. I: *The Spell of Plato*, (New York/London: Routledge, [1945] 2003), pp. 75–76. According to Popper, for Plato 'natural' is "what is innate or original or divine in a thing".

Plasticity is, thus, central to the nature of human beings because 'nature' is always changing. Yet human beings have an overwhelming desire for stability and order.[26] They make great use of the imagination to weave around themselves images of stability in the present, of an Eden from which their ancestors were expelled in the past, or a utopia which their descendants will create in the future. It may be possible that naturalism is but another attempt by the imagination to manufacture stability and to ward off the Heraclitean curse of inexorable and constant change or becoming. In this sense naturalism may be understood as both 'natural' in the sense that it is something which beings do, and as 'unnatural' or 'artificial', in the sense that it attempts to deny the natural order by means of convention.

Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* appears to agree with the absurd or tragic longing of the modern man to be one or in harmony with nature, an impulse for which the term 'naïve' was coined by Schiller. Nietzsche writes, in fact, that this oneness of man with nature is not the product of an effortless condition, which develops naturally as if it were inevitable:

> It is not a condition that, like a terrestrial paradise *must* necessarily be found at the gate of every culture. Only a Romantic age could believe this, an age which conceived of the artist in terms of Rousseau's *Emile* and imagined that in Homer it had found such an artist Emile, reared at the bosom of nature.[27]

If we accept the idea that plasticity and finitude are, in a sense, the characteristics of a natural human being, then what does this say about the social and political creations which human beings make? The first thing, which must be dispensed with, is any idea that human beings can create a political or social order, which is impervious to change and embodies some sort of perfect expression of human nature. Human nature exists in time, in the *saeculum*, just as utopia exists out of time, in the realm of political ideas or the Augustinian 'City of God'. Until the end of transience and temporality comes, there will be constant change, be it growth or decay, and human beings are unable to escape the preordained or 'natural' cycle of change. Plasticity is an ontological feature of all beings, which happen to live a temporal existence. It was recognised by Heraclitus the Obscure in what has become a famous aphorism: "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man."[28]

It is for this reason that human beings have been given the Apollonian gift of plasticity because they cannot exist without it. "Apollo is the god of all plastic energies,

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[26] M. Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, Trans. Oscar Burge, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 23–33.

[27] F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, section 3. (New York: Dover Publications, 1995). Emphasis in the text.

[28] Heraclitus, fragment B 49a, in H. Diels. & W.Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 10th edition, (Berlin, 1952).

the ruler over the beautiful illusion of the inner world of fantasy", as Nietzsche draws attention to.[29]

Consequently they must adapt to new circumstances, change their ways of doing things as the world itself changes. They must be wary of any doctrine, which tells them that there is a time of rest and peace located either in an idealised past or an ideal future. Such an understanding does not intend to disparage in any way those who wish to spend their lives in a perennial theodicy of some sort, but only notes that, if the whole human race decided to pursue such an ascetic path, it would truly spell the 'End of History'. Morality or ethics should not, in fact, be separated from aesthetics: the Socratic-Platonic man should not dominate at the expense of the Sophoclean-Aristotelian man. The effects of the 'great cultural schism' between ethics and aesthetics, brought about by the Enlightenment's quest for the 'Universal', are known to all, imperialism and totalitarianism being just two sorrowful examples of the devastation wreaked by such a division .

Yet humanity currently lives in an age in which models of ideal stability tend to dominate the way in which we think. In his brilliant documentary *All Watched over by Machines of Loving Grace*, Adam Curtis demonstrates how models of 'balanced systems', largely derived from cybernetics and computers, tend to mould the way in which the West has viewed the world over the past fifty years.[30]   One can see how important these models have been in economics, science and environmentalism. The ideology behind climate change only makes sense when seen as expressing a desire to return to a balanced system, in which human beings and something called the 'environment' are in equilibrium and in harmony. If, as has been argued, the fifty years after World War II have been the most benign period in human history,[31] then there is a natural tendency by all to believe that such relatively peaceful stability is the natural condition of humanity, thus creating the false impression or dystopia that a short period of good fortune is the normal state of the world. But, in truth, no such harmony exists or has ever existed.   Or rather there is a harmony at every point of time, but the configuration of that harmony is ceaselessly changing. This occurs because the system and its underlying paradigm are not permanent, just as human beings are not permanent. The latter are paradoxically plastic and finite, an ironic combination of Parmenidean being and Heraclitean becoming.   In such circumstances the appropriate means for understanding the world may very well be those techniques which may be seen as belonging to the infancy and childhood of human beings:

[29] F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, section 1.

[30] Adam Curtis, *All Watched over by Machines of Loving Grace*, 3 part documentary BBC, 23 May, 2011.

[31] David Archibald, *Twilight of Abundance: Why Life in the 21ˢᵗ Century will be Nasty, Brutish, and Short*, (Washington: Regnery, 2014), p.1.

aphorisms, parables, stories and metaphors. Only these forms of verbal expression can capture the complexity, contradictions and inconsistencies, which human beings discover about or encounter in their world, 'nature' and their interaction with the latter. Aphorisms, in fact, while voicing contradictions, also allow for their accommodation. As logic is an artificial construction, what it preaches does not necessarily correspond to the natural order of things. It suffices to consider the three fundamental principles of logic: Identity, Non-Contradiction; Exclusion of the Third. These are conventions, normative principles transformed into deontic ones, as they are not deduced from nature, but which are, nevertheless, applied to the human understanding of nature. Thus humans 'imagine' nature by means of these three artificial principles, they do not really come to 'know' it. Logic is just another 'scientific' paradigm, a system of conventions, prone to be falsified at one stage just as the statements and propositions of Newtonian mechanics and Euclidean geometries, when applied to understand the infinite universe, were dramatically falsified. While these statements worked in the closed, finite physical realm of the earth subjected to the rules of gravity, of space and time, they were useless in the spaceless and timeless realm of the universe. Scientific theory thus becomes the creative work of imagination, controlled by rational thought. Reality is no longer regarded, as Gaston Bachelard observes, as an object of knowledge but a pretext for scientific thought: the aim is not to explain reality but to provide a theoretical comment of it. [32]

The same can be said of Logic: this creature of the demiurgic capacity of reason is falsified by the timeless, spaceless, and irrational dimension of being. This explains why Nietzsche, in *The Gay Science*, introduced the trope or allegory of the madman to announce the death of God[33] and Erasmus weaves his praise of 'Folly' to voice truth.[34]

Truth cannot be uttered by reason and alethic modalities do not necessarily produce truth. Nature itself can restore its control and power only in the instant of madness.[35] Thus human beings cannot grasp totally, objectively and lucidly the ontological reality of the world. It would seem that a healthy and honest scepticism, one which calls for the suspension of any final and totalising judgement, would be the best way of operating within an ever changing world. Scepticism recognises, in fact, the limits of

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[32] G. Bachelard, *Il Nuovo Spirito Scientifico* [*Le Nouvel Esprit Scientifique*], (Bari: Laterza, [1934] 1951), 75–84. The shift is from explanation to interpretation.

[33] F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science with a Prelude of Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. W. Kaufmann, (New York: Random House, 1974), §125.

[34] Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Praise of Folly*, (London: Penguin, 1993). Erasmus claimed that even Christ "was made something of a fool himself in order to help <the folly of mankind> when he assumed the form of a man". 125–126.

[35] M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, (New York: Vintage Books, [1965] 1988), p. 284.

human reason and of its capacity to think of and know the world in its entirety, to organise it in a precise, all-encompassing form because it cannot be categorically expressed by language: human knowledge of the world can only be, in fact, one dimensional.

The triumph of a certain one dimensional approach to the world can be seen in the triumph of the treatise and with it, the commentary. This is the milieu of the human gift for endless elaboration in all its glory as human beings, or at least human beings of a particular sort, reduce what are often quite complex ideas to a systematic format, suitable for use by a bureaucracy, which operates mechanistically, driven by the imperatives of efficiency and rationalisation, to legitimate and organise authority and paradigms of domination and control.[36] This endless elaboration is the consequence of the aporetic and artificial nature of linguistic conventions, the source of all instability, confusion and disquiet, as linguistic conventions which, being inherently historical, allow for the transformation of the ontological tension between essence and appearance into a historical tension whereby the intrinsic negativity of concepts and their relation to the world are understood as the work of historical subjects, namely the struggle of man with nature and with society. [37]

Recognition that human beings are plastic and limited beings making their way in a world which is in constant flux *ipso facto* excludes both excessive optimism and excessive pessimism regarding the human condition. Excessive optimism is not possible because the limitations of human cognition mean that human beings will never possess the knowledge to correct all the deficiencies of human existence; likewise excessive pessimism is not warranted because human beings are plastic and thus capable of responding to changing circumstances. To dream of an Eden or of a Utopia, at which humanity will arrive at the end of History, may be rooted in human nature. What both really represent, however, is a desire to escape from time and the inevitability of change. Such desire arises out of a combination of recognition of human limitation and of the plasticity of human nature as expressed through the human capacity to exercise the faculty of imagination, to create in the human mind things which have no existence in the real world, things which ultimately become the source of deception and disillusion.

What remains constant about nature and human nature is the reality of change and the need to respond to that change. Human beings are plastic creatures who simultaneously help to create change and must respond to that change, but who at

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[36] See in this regard M. Weber, *Economy and Society: an Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, trans. by G. Roth & G. Wittich, New York: Bedminster Press, 1968.

[37] H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, (London/New York: Routledge [1964], 2002), 144–145.

times dream of breaking out of the world of change and into a universe of peace and stability. With change comes anxiety and the fear that one's hopes will be thwarted. There is nothing more joyful in this world than to be granted or to 'hope' for grace through peace. In this anxious longing resides the tragic nature of the human condition.

The strength of the desire by human beings to escape from actual change can be seen in the way in which they are seduced by virtual reality, be it in written, dramatic or digital form. The drive to transcend the *hic et nunc* is very powerful in human nature, as is the desire to impose the perfection of a timeless, ideal universe on a constantly changing world. Another example of the desire to reduce the inherent dynamic complexity of a reality, oscillating between entropy and negantropy, to a timeless and static stability or intransience, has been the popularity of intellectual models as a means of approaching that messiness and taming it.[38] Of course, the development of computers has allowed for this propensity to substitute models for reality to grow. Computer modelling has created the illusion that reality can be captured, reduced to a system of constants and variables, even imprisoned, within a construct of the human mind.[39] Once reality has been thus captured, the hope grows that, since its developments can be predicted, it can be re-made through acts of human volition; the flux and change of the world will be made to submit to the assumed timeless creations and paradigms of 'virtual reality'. However, as the history of the past two hundred and fifty years has taught us, every attempt to impose a timeless ideal on human beings, through an act of will, leads inexorably to disaster.

The most sensible application of naturalism to human affairs is to consider in a disinterested fashion the complex relationship which human beings have with the world of which they are part. That relationship is governed by the constant changes to which the universe is subject as well as the finite quality of human nature and its plasticity.

This plasticity is illustrated most convincingly by the variety of paths which human culture and politics have taken. In *Yes Minister*, Bernard observes that, unlike Latin, Greek does not have an ablative; he could have added the presence of the middle voice in Greek, which Latin lacks, and the absence of articles in Latin which Greek possesses, the point being that these two Indo European languages had gone down

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[38] The sociology of Talcott Parsons, based on the systems theory approach, is an example of such attempt. See T. Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971).

[39] See in this regard N. Weiner, *Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in Man and Machine*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1949).

different paths at one stage of their development before their appearance in their historical settlements.[40]

Politics demonstrates the point in an equally convincing fashion. Moses Finley has argued that one has a good knowledge of only three ancient polities: Athens, Rome and Sparta.[41] Considered generically, they all at some stage possessed three similar structural elements, namely a popular assembly (or assemblies), some type of magistrate or executive ruler, and an aristocratic assembly composed of experienced members of the polity. Notwithstanding the outward similarities and, possibly, common origins, they however became substantially different as they evolved in quite distinctive ways. In Sparta the popular assembly had little power and power rested with the two kings, the council of elders or *Gerousia,* and the Ephorate. In Athens, democracy emerged when the archons, along with their council, the *Aeropagus,* were largely stripped of their power, which was then transferred to the popular assembly, the *ecclesia.* In Rome, there was a largely aristocratic regime with power vested in the magistrates (consuls and praetors) and the council, the senate, composed of former magistrates, while the various assemblies were carefully managed to limit their power. It follows that as Harriet Flower fittingly argues, one must be cautious in talking about *the* Roman republic.[42]

The crucial point is that the paths followed by these three societies were distinct and different despite being constructed out of essentially the same elements. One wonders how Athens and Sparta managed to take such radically different paths; indeed one is amazed as to how Sparta managed to create what is, for the XXI century western observer, a bizarre polity, social system and culture, a culture which was widely admired by many members of the Athenian elite.[43] But then was Sparta any more bizarre than the slaves-on-horseback forms of polity, which emerged in many Islamic societies or European states run by soldier monks?[44]

A similar point has been made recently by James Allan in his study of contemporary Anglophone democracies.[45] All of them are composed of the same elements but they are all different. For example, both the United Kingdom and

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[40] In this regard see: W.S. Allen, 'Relationship in comparative Linguistics', *Transactions of the Philological Society Oxford*, 1953, 52–108; Allen W.S., *Accent and Rhythm. Prosodic Features of Latin and Greek: A Study of Theory and Reconstruction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

[41] M. I. Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[42] Harriet I. Flower, *Roman Republics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[43] Anton Powell, *Athens and Sparta: Constructing Greek Political and Social History from 478 BC*, 2nd ed., (London: Routledge, 2001).

[44] See in this regard R. Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*: *A History of Central Asia*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970).

[45] James Allan, *Democracy in Decline: steps in the wrong direction*, (Ballarat: Connor Court, 2014).

Canada possess weak upper houses; New Zealand has only one house of parliament, while the United States and Australia both have powerful upper houses as the Australian senate has been modelled on the American one. Although they all belong to the same genus of polities, each one of them is nevertheless progressively evolving into different species.

It appears evident that there is a caveat here for all of those who believe that democracy is somehow the 'natural' form of polity towards which all peoples will naturally evolve. Polities most certainly follow an internal logic, an entelechy dictated by their origins, just as Athens and Sparta, which both found themselves 'locked into' behaving in certain ways, partly as a consequence of decisions made at particular points of their historical development.[46] The logic, of course, will vary according to the polity and the ways in which its members respond to their circumstances and their world of experience. Logic, in fact, has its own contours or boundaries and innately follows a particular course: it is a bounded reality which lacks the faculty of creativity and of plasticity. This is not to say that there are not certain similarities in the way in which polities behave and hence evolve, but the devil is always in the detail. Particular polities take the specific form they do because they build on practices, ideas and institutions, which they have developed over a long period of time. It is what Marshall Hodgson, comparing the West and the Islamic world, termed 'cultural patterning'.[47] Cultural patterning occurs for the same reason as language changes; it is the consequence of finitude and plasticity.

This does not mean that the changes which occur are somehow arbitrary; they occur as individuals make choices to deal with particular circumstances. They can only employ the resources at hand. Hence the founding fathers of the Australian constitution chose the American senate as the model for their own upper house. Once that choice had been made, and an institutional structure created, it helped to mould the direction, which the Australian polity has taken ever since, although a combination of ecosystemic and historical factors might have given an intrinsically different meaning to that direction. This is the 'natural' form for the Australian polity, but in two hundred years it may have evolved into something quite different.[48]

If there is a 'natural order' that defines human beings and the types of social and political order which they are capable of creating, it is certainly not a fixed order to

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[46] In this regard see: R. Osborne., *Greece in the Making 1200 -479 B.C.*, (London/New York: Routledge, [1996] 2003), 161–214.

[47] Marshall G. S.Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, Ed. Edmund Burke III, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 126–170.

[48] Greg Melleuish, 'Australian federalism's chronic condition,' in N Walker (Ed) *Australian Scholarly Publishing's Essays 2014 Politics*, (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2014), 50–9.

which they must conform. Human beings are creatures who inhabit a temporal order, an order which is marked by constant change and flux. Although they are organically finite beings, they are nevertheless 'historical beings', as they live in space and in time. To survive and flourish in such an environment they must be able to change and adjust. Their nature is to be plastic so that they may adapt and change as their world of experience changes.

Simultaneously, however, and for very arcane and unfathomable reasons, human beings long for stability and order, for an escape from the insecurities and anxieties, which a world of flux burdens them with. This is why they often revert to non-temporal understandings of a natural order in the hope that they can escape from time and hence from the binding force of historicity. But there is no escape. In this way the abstract qualities of traditional naturalism, rooted in prose and such literary forms as the philosophical treatise or the commentary, provides comfort and creates the illusion that change is ultimately an illusion. If one were to understand the world in which human beings live, it would be necessary not only to go beyond 'naturalism' as a doctrine, canon or paradigm, but also realise that to understand reality and come to terms with its mutability there are a multiplicity of modes of expression, ranging from poetry to painting, from music to silence, of which one can make use in the perpetual human quest for meaning.

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