


Article

Pandemic and the Nature-Alienated Self

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Abstract: This consideration of COVID-19 places the pandemic in the larger context of our present-day ontology and the environmentally destructive human–nature relationship that characterizes it, exploring it in three parts. First, it sets out the problematic conceptualization of nature in the modern social imaginary by focusing upon the self in terms of its sense of identity, agency and authority. Second, it sets out how the pandemic fundamentally disrupts these three facets of the self in terms of the fragilization of economic values, the notion of unique human agency, and the limitation of the authority of discursive reason. Finally, it concludes by outlining the opportunity for a renewed relationship with nature by proposing the recovery of the premodern concepts of metaphysical participation, teleology, and rational intuition. In doing so, the pandemic crisis is considered in the wider context of the ecological crisis of the modern age, and as an opportunity for rethinking our collective concept of nature, and the place of our selves within it.

Keywords: COVID-19; ecological crisis; teleology; metaphysical participation



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1. Introduction

The acute nature of the pandemic crisis is such that it has significantly challenged the modern social imaginary, the pre-reflective, tacit, paradigmatic stories, images and ideologies by which we conceptualize ourselves and our place in the world. This differs markedly from other phenomena that are also symptoms of the global environmental crisis, such as species extinction, air pollution, or climate change. It forces human beings to re-think the concept of the self that is set apart from and over nature, a concept shared by most inhabitants of the globalized and industrialized world. This modern version of the self, the paradigm of the modern social imaginary, has given many human beings profound powers to reshape nature, whilst simultaneously disconnecting many of them from it, with devastating consequences. Such civilizational disconnect can only be overcome by an epochal shift in the modern social imaginary. The challenge of the pandemic, which will continue to unfold in the coming years as both the virus and civilizational responses to it evolve, presents the opportunity to rethink the human–nature relationship in potentially constructive and productive ways.

This consideration characterizes the crisis and opportunity of the COVID-19 pandemic in three parts: First, it sets out the problematic conceptualization of nature in the modern social imaginary by considering the way many in the modern world conceive of the self in terms of its sense of identity, agency and authority. Second, it describes how the pandemic has fundamentally disrupted these three facets of the buffered self in terms of the fragilization of economic values, the notion of unique human agency, and the limitation of the authority of discursive reason. Finally, it concludes by outlining the opportunity for a renewed relationship with nature by proposing the recovery of premodern concepts structurally excluded from the modern social imaginary, not as simple forms of re-enchantment, but as resources for creatively re-thinking the human–nature relationship. In particular it will consider the notions of the metaphysics of participation, the concept of teleology, and the concept of intuition. In the context of the global pandemic, and in the face

of the broader global ecological catastrophe, both of which challenge the modern nature-alienated self, humans are presented with an opportunity to confront both by rethinking our collective concept of nature, and the place of humans within it.¹

2. The Modern Nature-Alienated Self

The pandemic has the capacity to force a collective re-evaluation of what Charles Taylor has aptly described as the buffered self, shared by most inhabitants of the globalized and industrialized world (Taylor 2007, pp. 27, 37–42, 131–42, 262–64, 300–7). The process by which we came to be modern buffered selves is a long and complex one, far beyond the scope of an examination this size.² However, we can come to a brief characterization of it by identifying three key facets that define and differentiate it from the premodern self from which it emerged, namely its unique sense of identity, agency, and authority. In doing so, the aim is not to highlight a favorable premodern understanding over a problematic modern one. Rather, it is to illustrate that with the development of the modern buffered self, and the gains that may have been achieved by it, there is also the concurrent structural exclusion of ways of thinking which deeply influence humanity's collective connection to non-human reality.³

For the buffered self, identity is grounded in self-originating concepts of meaning and value, whether originating in one's own self, or other autonomous selves. The modern self is therefore established in the context of a subject–object dynamic, where individual subjects and their internal concepts are set over and against external objects, creating the framework for the modern sense of autonomy (Taylor 1989, p. 188). Alternatively, for the premodern self, identity is manifested through a relational framework, where meaning and value are intelligible ontic realities, adhering both in the external corporal realities that instantiate them, and the internal mental thought of the minds that think them. The result is a heteronymic notion of agency, based upon an interdependent subject–object dialogue, where meaning and value is determined dialogically.

The difference between the modern and premodern is exemplified by comparing Aquinas and Kant on the concept of ideas (Hampton 2018b, pp. 187–98). In Aquinas' (Ia.15.1) realist perspective, participatory metaphysics we find a succinct formulation: "by ideas are understood the forms of things, existing apart from the things themselves . . . [either as] the type of that which is called the form, or to be the principle of the knowledge of that thing". Contrastingly, in the critical idealist philosophy of Kant (1992, p. 590), we find an opposing formulation: "The idea is a concept of reason whose object can be met with nowhere in experience". What is expressed here by idealism is also true for many other modern positions, be it Cartesian rationalism, Lockean empiricism, or linguistic structuralism, viz. the position that there is no knowledge of external reality except through its internal representation (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, p. 3). The modern construction of autonomous identity leaves the external world, and particularly the natural world, devoid of inherent meaning and value. Rather, external reality becomes the raw material to which anthropocentric meaning and value is applied. Autonomous modern identity bases itself on its powerful capacity to confer as part of its own process of self-determination. In this context the natural world becomes an unprocessed resource of fungible, identikit materials awaiting human exploitation (Hampton 2020, pp. 263–85).

Agency for the buffered self is conceptualized in a similar way, as an exclusively human capacity. It is only humans who are capable of acting upon a purpose, with intentionality, towards an end. Purposes, or ends, are something that are added to nature externally, either by humans, or in some modern conceptualizations by God as the artificer of the mechanism of creation (Paley 2008, pp. 7–10). This may be contrasted to premodern understanding, where non-exclusive human agency is situated within a network of interlocking agencies, both human and non-human, deliberative and non-deliberative. For the premodern, God did not create a mechanism and set it to run; rather, creatures are sustained by God's continuation of existence.⁴ In the case of divine involvement, what individual creatures

have from God's agency, they truly have themselves as their own, whilst also having that agency only from God.

Again, we can exemplify this by contrasting modern and premodern understandings of Aristotelian causation. For example, Averroës defends the attribution of agency to objects, whether they act voluntarily or non-voluntarily: "an agent [*fa'īl*] is what causes some other thing to pass from potency to actuality and from non-existence to existence; this actualization occurs sometimes from deliberation and choice, sometimes by nature."⁵ Compare this to Bacon (1902, pp. 108–9), who argues: "It is rightly laid down that true knowledge is that which is deduced from causes. The division of four causes also is not amiss: matter, form, the efficient, and end or final cause. Of these, however, the latter is so far from being beneficial, that it even corrupts the sciences, except in the intercourse of man with man." For Bacon, the agency of final cause is only useful in the explanation of human actions, as only humans are capable of determining purpose, and acting with intent. For non-human nature, the attribution of agency only undermines our understanding of its operation.

Again, there are consequences. The modern anthropocentric conceptualization of agency withdraws any agency from nature. The external world is left to be understood in the passive, mechanical terms of cause and effect. This leaves nature as a blind mechanism, either created by a watchmaker God, or directionless, as is the case with natural selection. The result is that there is no external agency with which the modern self must negotiate, with the exception of other selves. Instead, agency is something that is added to a passive, mechanistic nature, either by God or humans, who give it purpose.

The final facet of the buffered self to consider is its authority. Through its sense of autonomous identity and unique agency, the buffered self is capable of distancing itself from both the physical and psychical self-imbedded in nature through the reconstruction of external reality according to the intrinsic categories of discursive reason. This makes it possible to dismiss the physical and emotional as inauthentic and irrational to the true self. The result is that the buffered self gains a sense of invulnerability, based upon the authority of its own objective, self-evident principles. This invulnerability can be distinguished from the premodern self, whose authority is restricted by its vulnerability to extrinsic ideas and non-human agents. External meaning and value elicit intuitive reason, which evoke motions and desires to which the self must by necessity respond. Similarly, external agencies, both human and non-human, must be negotiated with or confronted as realities (Taylor 2007, pp. 37–38).

An example of the vulnerable premodern self is the Christian Platonism of Pseudo-Dionysius (708a), for whom "all being derives from, exists in, and is returned toward the Beautiful and the Good", which are divine names for God. All things, human and non-human, animate and inanimate, "are stirred to do and to will whatever it is they do and will because of their yearning for the Beautiful and the Good", which is at once their divine origin and their divine end (593d, 708a). Here, to know the self is to be attuned to the cosmic order, to follow one's intuitive reason, in desire and yearning, and to relate them to the divine end, which is their source. By contrast, Descartes offered a position based upon radical doubt that was distrusting of both the senses and tradition and focused upon that which it was possible to know with authority. Rules two and three of his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* read:

"We should attend only to those objects of which our minds seem capable of having certain and indubitable cognition. Concerning objects proposed for study, we ought to investigate what we can clearly and evidently intuit or deduce with certainty, and not what other people have thought or what we ourselves conjecture. For knowledge can be attained in no other way" (Descartes 1984, 1:10, 13).

Here, knowledge is restricted to the ordered representation of reality, distanced from the deceiving senses and emotional conjecture, and derives its authority from the disciplined deliberation of the autonomous self.

The authority that the buffered self derives from this reconstruction of external reality profoundly effects the ways we conceive of nature and our place within it. Our physical disembedding is recapitulated through the abstract values and meaning which are used to reconstruct it, either through intellectual systems, such as the sciences and economics, or in the construction of the Cartesian grid cities that the modern social imaginary imposes upon the landscapes that our buffered selves occupy. Similarly, our psychic reactions to nature, whether manifest as a desire to be part of it, or the sense of intrinsic value and meaning derived from its beauty and goodness, are delegitimated as sentimentality, or epiphenomenal remnants of a primitive past.

3. Pandemic and the Self

The pandemic presents a situation that fundamentally challenges the modern social imaginary. In particular, it undermines the three facets of buffered self elaborated above, and in so doing, the way we conceptualize the human–nature relationship.

First, the pandemic disrupts the buffered self's self-originating construction of meaning and value, and in so doing challenges the autonomous identity upon which it is based. This is particularly manifested in the fragilization of economic meaning and value, arguably the most powerful meaning–value system in operation in the modern social imaginary. This in turn affects identity formation, for in its construction of the external world, the economics of the modern social imaginary simultaneously construct self-identity by determining actions, motivations, and forms of self-definition within the matrix of capital. Yet in the face of the pandemic such self-defining activities have been destabilized, particularly in terms of education and employment (Arezki et al. 2020, pp. 6–14, 20–39; Banks et al. 2020). Adding to this, the fluctuation or collapse of the value of numerous commodities and economic activities generate uncertainties that effect human well-being on a wide socio-psychological scale (Thakur and Jain 2020; Godinic et al. 2019, pp. 61–74; Taylor 2019, pp. 23–38). Finally, challenges to the economic meaning–value system, which in diverse ways encompass nations and transcends political orientations, undermines the sacrosanct principles of identity-forming political ideologies, from the confidence of some in the efficacy of centralized state direction and provision, to the belief of others in the efficiency and wealth re-distributing powers of economic globalisation (Collier 2020).

Second, the notion of unique human agency is undermined. In one manner, the pandemic reveals an entangled network of human and non-human agencies that impinges upon the free activity of exclusive human agency. Such impingements are not rare occurrences, however on almost all occasions they are rendered localizable or imperceptible within the broad framework of the modern social imaginary, thereby allowing them to be subsumed into a system that denies their agency based upon the anthropocentric notion of individual intentionality. Even such continent-wide events as the Australian bush fires of 2019–2020, or the mass famine in West Africa caused by the 2012 Sahel drought, despite their scale, can still be rendered distant, and therefore not a consequence of the wider disconnect between agency conceived anthropocentrically, and its broader actuality (Vardoulakis et al. 2020, pp. 635–36; Dai 2013, pp. 52–58). Yet, whilst these probable symptoms of climate change can be localized, the pandemic affects human agency on an immediate, visceral and global scale that cannot be subsumed into the modern social imaginary.

In another manner, the pandemic exposes the normalized injustice of the unequal actualization of agency amongst human actors, laid bare in the disproportionate suffering of marginalized individuals and groups. Examples such as state coercion and oppression in communist China, or economic and political disenfranchisement in the United States, are brought into greater relief (Zhu et al. 2020, pp. 1–4; Chaturvedi and Gabriel 2020, pp. 1–8). Both are transverse manifestations of an understanding of human agency determined anthropocentrically and conceived in terms of economic meaning and value that benefits a select group, rather than extrinsically determined meaning and value, conceived in the context of a network of interlocking agencies, both human and non-human.

Finally, the authority of the buffered self, based upon the reconstruction of nature through invulnerable discursive reason, shows its limitations in the context of the pandemic. Well before COVID-19, virologists were warning about the limitations of an abstract definition of life which requires the exclusion of viruses (Villarreal and Witzany 2010, pp. 698–710; Goic and Saleh 2012, pp. 531–37; Forterre 2010, pp. 151–60). A consequence of this exclusion is that biological experiments are often conducted in artificial and unrealistic conditions that exclude the role of viruses (Villarreal and Witzany 2015, p. 315). This abstract re-construction of nature results in unintended negative consequences for the understanding of life in general, the role of viruses in particular, and the practical ability to consider and manage their effects. In this way, the pandemic demonstrates the limitations of authoritative discursive reason, which in this instance has failed to take account of the virosphere in which all life operates because of the limitations of the abstract framework it imposes upon nature.

Simultaneously, whilst the invulnerability of the detached self is undermined, its emotive entanglements with the natural world are revealed as far from overcome. The pandemic has brought emotions to the fore of our collective conscious actions. These were demonstrated by panic consumption and xenophobia, which were among the first reactions to overcome the emotional and physical detachment of the buffered self. However, it has also surprisingly manifested itself in joy and wonderment, in the form of a renewed connection to nature. Among the second wave of stories following the initial period of pandemic panic were media reports from urban areas around the world of once again hearing birdsong, and of seeing wildlife in places from which it had previously been excluded or its presence obscured (Asensio et al. 2020, p. 4206). Though such stories can convey a problematic anthropocentric self-congratulatory element, this human awareness of non-human meaning and value, in the context of pandemic-limited human agency, also invites humans back into dialogue with the natural world which we, in our modern social imaginary, have buffered ourselves from (Hess 2020).

4. Apocalypse and Opportunity

The word “apocalypse” tends to be invoked as a synonym for cataclysm, yet the accurate theological use of the term, *apo*, “off”, and *kaluptein*, “to cover”, is remarkably accurate to the situation. The opportunity of the pandemic in the midst of the challenge and grief is to escape the mind-forged manacles of the buffered self. This positive apocalypse, in challenging the modern social imaginary, directs our attention back to premodern theological modes of conceptualizing the human–nature relationship. These cannot, nor should they be, adopted wholesale into our modern context. However, they do offer themselves as a resource for the present-day challenge of reconceptualizing nature and the place of humans, not apart from, but within it, in the context of the pandemic unbuffering of the self.

The pandemic challenge to subject-centered concepts of meaning and value, and the anthropocentric construction of identity that arises from them invite us to re-examine the philosophical notions of realism and participation, which understand the external world as possessed of its own meaning and value, and its own intrinsic identities, regardless of a human presence to acknowledge and confirm them. Realism is a philosophical position which holds that ideals (or ideas, forms, transcendentals) are real extra-mental realities that transcend both the objects that instantiate them and the minds that think them. The cosmos participates in these ideas, making the intelligible archetypes corporally present, unfolding them in myriad and unique ways (*Phaedo*, 99c ff). A realist-participatory view of reality, therefore, requires individuals to conceptualize the natural world as something with which they must dialogue in order to arrive at concepts of meaning and value, rather than imposing these themselves from without. By extension, in the realist context, nature is also something that possesses, and is therefore capable of teaching true, mind-independent meaning and value. It is in the context of this subject–object exchange that human identity can be formed dialogically with the external natural world, possessed of its own identities.

The result of realism, therefore, is to render nature no longer a raw material or fungible resource to which meaning and value are added monologically by the self. Rather, nature is a reality, with its own inherent meaning and value, which demands a level of recognition based upon its own intrinsic worth (Hampton 2020, pp. 381–407).

It follows from the notion that all things in the cosmos participate in philosophically real meaning and value, that these real ideals also give all things their own purpose. In the apocalypse of the pandemic, we may begin to appreciate the notion that ends, or *telois*, are intrinsic to all creatures themselves, human and non-human, intentional and natural, even animate and inanimate. The pandemic disruption to exclusive human agency reveals a complex ecology of interlocking agents and ends. This recognition of relationality in agency demands of us that we exercise our own agency relationally as well. The concept of teleology teaches us that matter is not merely passive, and purpose is not something imposed from outside; instead, “every agent acts for an end” (Hampton 2021, pp. 263–85). Rather, our own agency is entangled with other agents, and this must be understood as a characteristic of being an agent, not a limitation upon agency. The flourishing of both humans and non-human nature is something that can only occur within this understanding of a network of shared, interdependent agencies. Greater cognizance of the multiplicity of agencies will lead us not only to better account for non-human agents, but also to fellow humans as well, as the exercise of agency shifts away from a narrow individualistic perspective, to a wider one which aims to compass a broad ecology of actors.⁶

Finally, the apocalyptic uncovering of the pandemic, in throwing the abstract reconstruction of nature by discursive reason into doubt and overwhelming the physical and psychic disembeddedness of the buffered self, calls for a recovery of our affective relationship to nature. Being in the natural world has long evoked desire, and the intuition “of something far more deeply interfused”, as Wordsworth put it.⁷ Building upon the notions of participation and teleology, our intuitive reactions to the natural world ought to be re-evaluated. Intuitive reason, in contrast to apodictic discursive reason, has often been understood as the means to arrive at truths about the world, perceived dimly at first, but in the fullness of time understood more deeply.⁸ Rather than understanding the feelings of desire and depth evoked by being in and experiencing nature as projections of the ego, they may be understood as genuine responses to the meaning intrinsic to nature itself, to its identity and its agency. As such, affection allows us to understand something about nature that quantification and abstract generalization cannot. This points us towards the latent possibility present in the language of aesthetics, developed in harmony with the cadence of nature, to sit alongside the more austere representations yielded by the natural sciences (Hampton 2018a, pp. 454–71).

In the disruption of the pandemic, and the challenges it poses to the modern social imaginary, there is an opportunity to form a renewed relationship with nature. As the sense of identity, agency and authority that defines the buffered self is respectively undermined by the fragilization of economic values, the impingement of extra-human agency, and the limitation of the authority of discursive reason, an apocalyptic opportunity presents itself. Ways of thinking about nature and the place of humans within it previously structurally excluded, once again become available in the un-buffering of the self. Each of those taken up here, realist participation, theology and non-human agency, and intuitive reason, do not present themselves as simple tools for re-enchantment, but they do offer us resources for creatively re-thinking the human–nature relationship. Whilst a simple return to the premodern, which is neither possible nor desirable, the un-buffering of the self and the loosening of the modern social imaginary present the opportunity for the emergence of a set of new hybrid possibilities for conceiving of ourselves in and of nature, which recognizes that nature is possessed of its own agency and ends and constituted by meanings and values that we must come to know on its own terms.

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Notes

- ¹ This article is based upon an earlier version titled ‘Ecology and the Unbuffered Self: Identity, Agency, and Authority in a Time of Pandemic’ (Hampton 2020).
- ² A number of historical narratives describe the emergence of modern identity. e.g., (Blumenberg 1966; Taylor 1989, 2007; Schneewind 1998; Gillespie 2008).
- ³ A similar case can be made for displaced forms of understanding nature offered by other world religions and indigenous religions, displaced by the globalised modern social imaginary and the buffered self.
- ⁴ *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.104.1; II Sent. 1.1.5 in (Aquinas 1997, p. 102).
- ⁵ In this context Averroës is defending the inherent agency in creation against its attribution, as he sees it in Al-Ghazali’s emanation philosophy, to God’s agency alone. (Averroës 1954, p. 3; Kogan 1985, pp. 27–45). cf. Philo, *De opificio mundi*, IV–VI; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II.1.2.
- ⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.2.1.
- ⁷ William Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*, l. 96.
- ⁸ See I Cor 12:12; *Phaedrus* 429d.

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