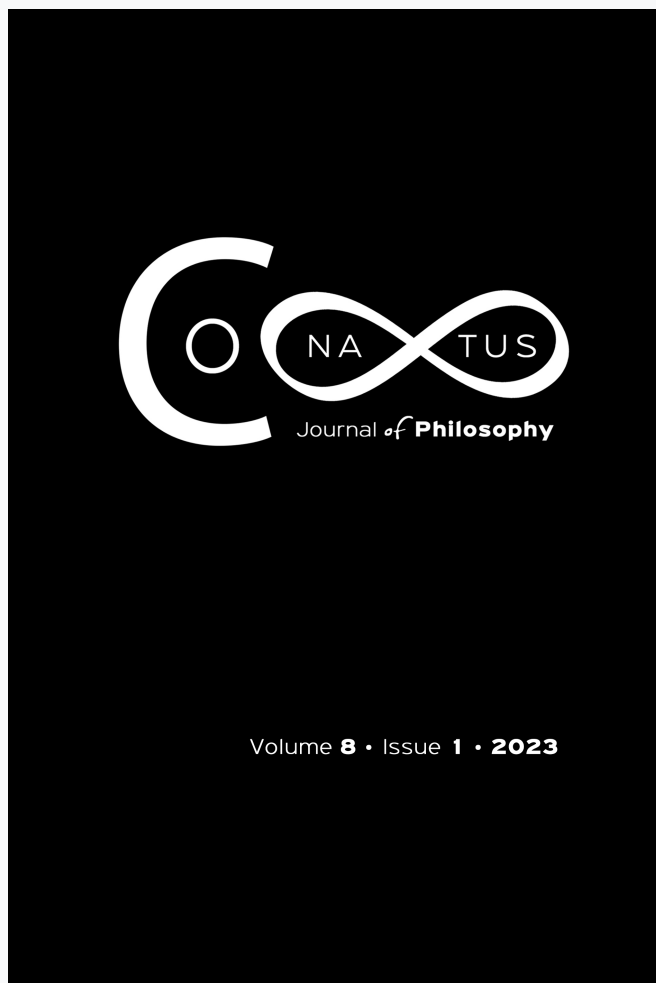


## Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 8, No 1 (2023)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy



### The Essence of Nature and Dialectical Naturalism

*Stavros Karageorgakis, Konstantina Lyrou*

doi: [10.12681/cjp.31845](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.31845)

Copyright © 2023, Konstantina Lyrou, Stavros Karageorgakis



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

#### To cite this article:

Karageorgakis, S., & Lyrou, K. (2023). The Essence of Nature and Dialectical Naturalism. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 8(1), 185–200. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.31845>

# The Essence of Nature and Dialectical Naturalism

## Stavros Karageorgakis

*National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece*

*E-mail address: ouzala@hotmail.com*

*ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4661-1360>*

## Konstantina Lyrou

*National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece*

*E-mail address: kwnstantinalyrou@gmail.com*

*ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5161-8620>*

### Abstract

*In this paper, we examine how nature is defined and perceived and address the conflict between constructivism and essentialism. By exploring modern perspectives on the concept of nature that stem from the field of social sciences, we will review the analysis of Murray Bookchin's dialectical naturalism regarding the very essence of nature. We argue that dialectical naturalism offers a dynamic developmental concept of nature that goes beyond the context of constructivism and supports that the truth of nature can be conceived.*

**Keywords:** *dialectical naturalism; social ecology; environmental philosophy; constructivism*

## I. Introduction: Starting with the social sciences

The issue that concerns us in this article is how humans approach the concept of nature. This question, however, can only be examined in relation to the question of man's relationship with nature. In the 1960s, the issue of the anthropocentric conception of the world was the prevailing view that claims that the physical world exists to serve humans. However, the debate over the question of man's place in nature goes way back and presupposes a pattern, which was perhaps different, rather than

contradictory. This is very much the case today. Thus, we usually resort to the “human-nature” dichotomy that is familiar to modern western societies. This view profoundly prevailed in the thoughts of great philosophers, such as Aristotle, and reached the twentieth century, forming fundamental beliefs, such as the right of usucaption of the planet by humans.

The issue of the confrontational relationship between man and nature, or between society and nature, has not only interested the history of philosophy, but also social sciences, especially anthropology, which depicted that the conflict between “man-nature” or even “society-nature,” is not as old as humans themselves, nor is it as self-evident in every culture and every historical period.<sup>1</sup> Examining this issue has led some anthropologists to investigate whether this controversy is a common human characteristic or a characteristic specific to Western civilization. There are abundant examples of a unity perception such as that of the Chewong tribe that lives in the rainforests of Malaysia, which does not place humans in the top rung of the creation, but rather within all plants, animals, and spirits; these native people believe that everything is conscious.<sup>2</sup> There are also examples of tribes that practically reject the opposing human-nature relationship, such as the hunters of the Waswanipi Cree peoples in northwestern Canada who do not distinguish humans from other animals, to whom they may even attribute personhood status.<sup>3</sup> The strict distinction maintained by Western ideology is a conspicuous demerit of a different perception of things. As Tim Ingold writes,

If people themselves profess to be aware of only one world, of persons and their relationships, it is because seeing their own social ambience reflected in the mirror of nature, they cannot distinguish the reflection from reality.<sup>4</sup>

This particular observation also coincides with inferences from the field of ethology, which reports analogies between human relations and the relations of non-human animals. In any case, such a view does not

---

<sup>1</sup> Philippe Descola, and Gisli Palsson, “Introduction,” in *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. Philippe Descola, and Gisli Palsson, 1-21 (London, and New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Signe Howell, “Nature in Culture or Culture in Nature? Chewong Ideas of ‘Humans’ and Other Species,” *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. Philippe Descola, and Gisli Palsson, 127-144 (London, and New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> However, there are discussions regarding whether Native Americans were ecologists in the way the modern environmental movement claims they were.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London, and New York: Routledge, 2000), 49.

allow the inclusion of other kinds of relationships that seem perhaps more interactive, such as the relationship of a tree to the forest, or less interactive and seemingly static like the relationship of a rock to a tree. These situations seem to be excluded from the context of “relationships” and accumulate in the category of “nature.”

Heidegger believed that building presupposes dwelling.<sup>5</sup> By that he meant that people alter their surroundings after their inhabitation. Ingold goes one step further and argues that man perceives his environment, or in other words, the world is meaningful through its inhabitation, and therefore, the transformation of the space to be inhabited does not precede.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Ingold believes that this also stands for non-human animals but with a significant difference in the way in which human from non-human animals modify and appropriate their environment. As regards to the statement of anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s that man “is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,”<sup>7</sup> Ingold points out that, for non-human animals, web threads represent a relationship between themselves and an object or some characteristic of the environment, that is, a relationship that arises because of their own “practical immersion in the world and the bodily orientations that this entails.”<sup>8</sup>

On the contrary, man creates another level of mental representations, a second level of meanings through which he processes reality. Non-human animals see in the world things that are ready to be used, while humans see in these objects the possible uses through the meaning they can give them. For example, Ingold writes that foxes settle into the roots of a tree to sleep, while the lumberjack adapts the mental image to the way he perceives the object, before taking action.<sup>9</sup> Ingold cites some examples of mechanical and supposedly biologically recorded behavior in non-human animals, such as the beaver-built nest, whose design “is incorporated into the same program that underwrites the development of the beaver’s own body: thus the beaver is no more the designer of the lodge than is the mollusk the designer of its shell.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Ingold, seems to rule out any possibility of non-

---

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 145-161.

<sup>6</sup> Ingold, 173.

<sup>7</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Ingold, 177.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 175.

human animals escaping the genetically inclined, since, as he writes “In all likelihood the human maker of string bags has an idea in mind of the final form of construction, whereas the weaverbird almost certainly does not.”<sup>11</sup>

Ingold proposes a comprehensive revaluation of human beings’ perception of themselves, as well as their relationship with nature. He suggests that we see man not as a complex entity consisting of body, mind and culture, but as a state of creative development within a growing field of relationships. These relationships are not exclusively human relationships, that is, what we call social relationships (disregarding the sociability of non-human animals) but the broader “ecological relationships.” Human relationships are a subset of ecological relationships, which include the set of interactions between human and non-human beings.<sup>12</sup>

It is true, however, that the idea of the term “environment” widens rather than narrows the gap between humans and nature. Albeit, humans should be familiar with what surrounds them, the use of this term signifies a deep anthropocentric conception, since we consider nature not as something that is self-existent, autonomous and has intrinsic value, but as something that exists in relation to us humans, and consequently for us humans. This is also etymologically validated, as the English word *environment*, which comes from the verb *environ*, which means *surround*. Thus, nature is transformed into something that simply “surrounds” humans and is deprived of its autonomous entity and its self-worth. Michel Serres believes that the use of the term “environment” presupposes that we consider ourselves the center of the world and masters and possessors of nature at the same time.<sup>13</sup> This perception of the world reflects the anthropocentric conception and has deep philosophical and religious roots. Both Aristotelian philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition, two of the most fundamental ideological pillars of modern Western civilization, presuppose such a conception.

The issue that arises from what we have stated so far is whether these perceptions of nature bear indeed some truths for nature itself or are just human mental forms. Is the acceptance of the explicit or implicit participation of humans in the co-shaping of the natural environment by social scientists, an admission of their realistic

<sup>11</sup> Ingold, 360.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract* (Ann Arbor, MA: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 33.

conception? A philosophical discussion about a constructivist or essentialist conception of physical reality will bring us one step closer to answering this question.

## II. The influence of constructivism

Michel Foucault, in his work *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*), describes an image in which a painter works while the viewer is in front of him, seeing only the back of the painting.<sup>14</sup> The painter stares at the viewer and paints. The viewer cannot see what the painter is painting, but he sees the painter very clearly. At times the painter's gaze intersects with the spectator's gaze. The spectator is rather the object of study of the painter; it is the subject of his painting. But the painter is the object of study of the spectator. Eventually we realize that the spectator is us. But who is the painter? Can we assume that the painter is the scientist or the philosopher and that we are the scientific or philosophical object? And if so, then we can perhaps reasonably assume that all we can know is the look of the painter, the subjectivity of the scientist and the philosopher and nothing more.

Therefore, we are led to another hypothesis, that people's perception of nature may be merely a social construction, and that our perception of nature is socially and ideologically mediated. This is the theory of social construction, and it has infused the debate about our relationship and the image we have of nature; in fact, the debate about the way humans see nature is of main focus to constructivism, since proponents of this theory believe that our perception of nature is a socially constructed system. This is a concept that has influenced both philosophy and the social sciences: "Nature is increasingly being seen as a social construction. Social science can no longer suppose the objectivity of nature as an unchanging essence."<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, essentialists consider that there is an objective, true substance, which we are able, and indeed, we manage to perceive. Moreover, essentialists believe that things work a certain way in nature, not because of any external constraints that force them to behave that way, but because they are intrinsically determined to work that way.<sup>16</sup> More importantly on the perception of nature, constructivism

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 19-24.

<sup>15</sup> Gerard Delanty, *Social Science* (Buckingham: Open University, 1997), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Ellis, *The Philosophy of Nature: A Guide to the New Essentialism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 3.

becomes even more emphatic since nature usually refers to the idea of an objective external reality, which is directly perceived through the senses, without the intervention of meaning. Therefore, the crucial question in the context of the essentialist-constructivist controversy is whether nature is purely natural. Is it an unchangeable substance that we are able to represent objectively or, possibly, what we consider natural, nature itself is a social and conceptual construction?

Indeed, constructivism exerts an irresistible charm. Historical studies on the subject of man's perception of nature over time, point in the direction of constructivism. Collingwood's classic *The Idea of Nature* is a prime example of this approach. Collingwood proposes a tripartite distinction on how we see nature, through a purely historicist approach. This approach recognizes a first phase that includes the Greek cosmological period and concerns the perceptions of the ancient Greeks, which focused on the perception that nature is inspired by the mind, by spirit. The second phase concerns mainly the sixteenth and seventeenth century and it is a reaction to the earlier Platonic and Aristotelian views on nature with emphasis on a mechanistic understanding of nature. Finally, Collingwood refers to a third phase, which he characterizes as the "modern view of nature," and is more inspired by the spirit of evolution.<sup>17</sup> Such an approach clearly shows a direction according to which the respective view of nature is imposed by historical conditions, which in turn are shaped by a series of philosophical, scientific or even, we could argue political factors. The advent of mechanical philosophy, for example, during the seventeenth century, gravely influenced our perception of nature, as a well-tuned watch.

Even Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theory is headed in this direction. The paradigm shift he analyses in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is essentially reversal of the way scientists interpret the phenomena they observe. This again, is a constructivist approach, as nothing in this Kuhn scheme assures us that scientists capture the essence of reality. Thus, Kuhn is fatally driven to subjectivity.<sup>18</sup>

The problem of constructivism is even more acute in the matter of nature, since our conceptions of the idea of nature affect all aspects of scientific thought and everyday life. The difference in this issue thus, is

---

<sup>17</sup> Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), 133-177.

<sup>18</sup> Certainly, this does not mean that both constructivists and essentialists do not admit that objective reality exists independent of people. It is true that even those who embrace constructivism do not ignore the fact that reality is one and only, nor do they necessarily slip into solipsism. In other words, they recognize that reality exists and has certain properties, which are impossible to be perceived in an objective way.

clear, since, “while the essentialist holds that the natural is repressed by the social, the constructionist maintains that the natural is produced by the social.”<sup>19</sup> We see this problem in ancient Greek thought when Xenophanes argued that no human would ever be able to learn the truth about the gods or other matters, and even if one knew the truth he could not realize it. For all things, Xenophanes said, there are only opinions.<sup>20</sup> So let’s now examine what radical philosophy has to offer in this debate. Could Marxism resolve this matter?

It is not so clear whether Marxism could support one side or the other. Marx sees nature as the “inorganic body” of human-modified by the latter; however, this does not mean that he does not recognize nature as an objective and accessible to him reality that precedes human. After all, this seems to be in line with a materialistic approach that wants the Being to be interwoven with Nature. Engels criticized Hegel’s subjectivity, arguing that the latter’s mistake was to assume that the laws of dialectics are imposed on nature and history as laws of the intellect, when, in fact, they should be inferred from both nature and from history.<sup>21</sup> When the intellect is not imposed on nature, as in Hegel’s view, but is inspired and meditated on it, then we can consider that subjectivity is beginning to lose ground.

On the other hand, newer Marxist approaches, such as the one offered by Althusser, advocate a constructivist approach. Althusser’s analysis of the concept of Marxist ideology is based on the logic of the denial to approach an objective external reality in the context of ideology. Each ideology forms a framework of apparent reality in which people believe, and consequently, every sphere of human activity moves within the ideological grid. Nothing can exist outside ideology and everything is given meaning by it. Althusser writes:

We may add that what thus seems to happen outside ideology (to be very precise, in the street) really happens in ideology. What really happens in ideology thus seems to happen outside it. That is why those who are in ideology, you and I, believe that they are by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical denegation of the ideological character of ideology by

---

<sup>19</sup> Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Against Professors*, 7:49.

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Engels, “Dialectics of Nature,” in Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, 313-734 (New York, International Publishers, 1987), 356.



ideology. Ideology never says ‘I am ideological.’ One has to be outside ideology, in other words, in scientific knowledge, to be able to say ‘I am in ideology’ (a quite exceptional case) or (the general case) ‘I was in ideology.’<sup>22</sup>

Althusser certainly does not exclude the field of ideology or science, which consciously operates in this ideological context, and therefore, we can also conclude, the study of nature.

How useful can said approach be for environmental philosophy? We are in this point of time that the planet faces huge ecological challenges; ecological movements are being formed, such as the climate justice movement, nature’s rights or animal rights, philosophy ought to engage more dynamically with the issue of our relationship with nature, as the way we see nature plays a decisive role in the way we function in nature. If the way we view nature is subjective, and if we are therefore unable to grasp the reality of nature then what nature should we protect? We believe that philosophy, and, in this case, environmental philosophy needs to come closer to modern environmental movements. Its findings must be able to be appropriated and exploited by the people who are fighting today for the future of the planet and its inhabitants, human and non-human animals. We believe that dialectics can offer a solution to this dilemma, in a creative and productive way for modern radical environmental thinking. The dialectic that will help in this direction is not that of Hegel, who identified the Idea with Being, and considered Nature and Spirit as ways of manifesting the Idea. Nor is it Marx’s dialectical materialism or Engels’ dialectic of nature. Perhaps it might come from Murray Bookchin’s dialectical naturalism.

### III. The contribution of dialectical naturalism

Murray Bookchin is a philosopher who greatly influenced environmental philosophy and the environmental movement. His ideas today can help shape a more coherent view of nature and offer vision to the modern environmental movement.

Bookchin argues that nature is not just what exists around us. Nature is essentially an evolutionary process, an evolutionary development to be precise, an eternal process that starts from the simplest and reaches the most complex. It starts from the elementary and reaches the complex. As Bookchin writes, it starts with the primary

---

<sup>22</sup> Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism, Ideology and Ideological States Apparatuses*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London, and New York: Verso, 2014), 191.

energy pulse that led to the Big Bang and reaches the most complex animal forms on our planet. As we understand it, this is not a linear or circular progression, but a cumulative one. At the same time said progression, the more it's passed into more complex forms, the more it composes a social framework, that is, it acquires a social character since it constitutes social relations. That is why nature is a "cumulative evolutionary process from the inanimate to the animate and ultimately the social [...]." <sup>23</sup>

However, this progression is not teleological as Aristotle would claim. In other words, this is not a path that will lead to a specific goal. But neither is there such a strong element of chance, as in modern physics. "Dialectical naturalism is an attempt to grasp nature as a developmental phenomenon, both in its organic and social realms. All organic phenomena change and, even more important, undergo development and differentiation. The form and reform, while actively maintaining their identity until, barring any accident, they fulfill their potential. But since the cosmos, seen in an overview of its evolution, is developmental as well, dialectical naturalism approaches the world as a whole from a developmental perspective. Its various realms – inorganic, organic, and social– are distinct from each other, and yet they grade into one another." <sup>24</sup>

In addition, Bookchin accepts Hegel's distinction between the two different meanings of reality, direct present empirical reality (*Realität*) and dialectical reality (*Wirklichkeit*). The second reality, unlike the first, contains the possibility, and also consists of the perfect fulfillment of a rational process. <sup>25</sup> To use Bookchin's example, in an egg we see nothing but *Realität*, but according to *Wirklichkeit*, there is also the possibility of the transformation into a bird. Therefore, the possibility in Bookchin is not the purpose (end, *telos*) of Aristotle. Things can either become something different or they can turn into nothing; their path is not predetermined.

Bookchin argues that in nature there is necessity and freedom. There are a number of possibilities that have led the planet to be what it is today. The second nature, society did not simply evolve, but chose, in other words, to take the form it holds. It is humans' will to shape a natural landscape into a park. Living beings are not mere spectators

---

<sup>23</sup> Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom, The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Montreal, and New York: Black Rose Books, 1991), xx.

<sup>24</sup> Janet Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: South and Press, 1991), 117.

<sup>25</sup> Murray Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology, Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (Montreal, and New York: Black Rose Books, 1995), 23.

of evolution, nor are they pawns called upon to play a predetermined role in the flow of natural history. The most distinct case is that of the human species. People can now shape evolution not only unconsciously but also consciously. Therefore, Bookchin not only sees necessity in nature; he also sees freedom and participation. Thus, according to his theory, he seeks the roots of culture and of the social element of evolution, in nature. He is interested in the escalation of biological development that accumulated from natural to social.<sup>26</sup>

This progression certainly is also converse. Bookchin argues that the context in which we look at nature has social characteristics but does not rule out the possibility of approaching the real essence of nature. He writes that “the way we view our position in the natural world is deeply entangled with the way we organize the social world.”<sup>27</sup> For example, a feudal society sees in the world a strict hierarchy, rights, and obligations. But this does not mean that the way of viewing is subjective, but that we draw examples from nature to organize society. In his suggested social ecology, however, the relationship between society and nature is harmonious. The social is potentially a fulfillment of the latent dimension of freedom in nature.<sup>28</sup> Thus, by dissolving the traditional dimension between society and nature, or between biological and cultural, he argues that these elements share characteristics of development, such as diversity. Another feature is the participation of all the components in a whole. Society developed through the communities of non-human animals and reached its current form with the existence of institutions.<sup>29</sup> In fact, it is this characteristic of institutionalization that separates the communities of other animals from the societies of humans. Bookchin’s naturalism also has to do with the correlation he makes between natural and social evolution. As in natural evolution, so too in social evolution, we must go beyond the image that diversity and complexity yield greater stability and emphasize that they yield greater creativity, choices, and, of course, freedom.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, as Bookchin noted, it would be more accurate to regard nature as a field of constant change, as a cumulative development of increasingly diverse and complex life forms, and of the inorganic world

---

<sup>26</sup> Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 85-86.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-93.

that pulsates and interacts with them.<sup>31</sup> Human activity is also a product of natural evolution, thus it cannot be condemned in advance. The idea of a pure, virgin nature cannot stand, since nature is not a passive state that simply accepts the actions of others. Plants and animals interact daily in its context and transform it as they constitute nature; nature is not something separate from them. Along with other animals, humans transform nature, regrettably to such an extent that it threatens life itself on planet Earth. As Bookchin writes,

This notion, which suggests that human beings and their works are intrinsically ‘unnatural’ and, in some sense, antithetical to nature’s ‘purity’ and ‘virginity,’ is a libel on humanity and nature alike.<sup>32</sup>

From an anthropological perspective, such an approach brings us closer to Ingold, who preaches a comprehensive reevaluation of humans ourselves, our relationship with nature, but also nature itself. He suggests that we see a human being not as a complex entity consisting of body, mind, and culture, but as a place of creative development within a growing field of relationships. These relationships are not exclusively human relationships, that is, what we call social relationships (ignoring, of course, the sociability of non-human animals) but the broader “ecological relationships.” Human relationships are a subset of ecological relationships, which include the set of interactions between human and non-human beings.<sup>33</sup>

To sum up everything it is stated so far, there are two useful conclusions about Bookchin’s philosophy that can help in the dispute between constructivism and essentialism. The first is that social constructions, as well as, social contexts that affect our perspective, do not necessarily trap us in a one-dimensional and historically imposed view of physical reality. The second, which is directly related to the first, is that humans are not trapped in these contexts because they can change themselves while being completely conscious of natural evolution. Humans consciously create, change, modify, transform, destroy, pulverize, eradicate, and re-create much of what is around them. They are not apathetic and non-participating viewers of history. Their active participation from an environmental point of view, while it may be catastrophic, it brings them closer to the essence of nature.

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 341-342.

<sup>33</sup> Ingold, 5.

This does not necessarily mean that they understand it. However, it does mean that they are not just viewers but active participants, or to be more precise, they break down the distance that constructivists present between them and nature.

In addition, it should be emphasized that this aspect of Bookchin's theory is both visionary and liberating. As mentioned above, where Hegel saw only necessity and coincidence in nature, Bookchin sees necessity and freedom. Ultimately, nature in Hegel is the expression of the Idea, and in fact, by its realization through nature the Idea achieves absolute freedom. In Bookchin, however, coincidentalism gives way to choice and even greater freedom. After all, he believes that dialectics is a path from abstraction to differentiation.<sup>34</sup> Murray Bookchin argued that humans can choose and create a "free nature" that transcends both purely animal "first nature" and social "second nature." Nature is an evolutionary field that can be full of either autonomy and freedom or of competition and self-destruction.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that we have so far chosen the latter as a human species does not mean that we are by nature competitive and self-destructive. The options are wide open and before our very eyes. This element of freedom must play an important role in our perception and narrative of nature, giving it a liberating meaning. People are part of this evolution, as well as, part of a narrative, as constructivists would agree. But the existing dynamics for change and their participation in it, as well as the possibility of choice cannot contribute in any case to any subjectivity. It is as real as their choices. At the same time, there is Bookchin's liberating and radical view, opposite to Hegel's view, that the choice to form a rational and ecological society can free us from the limits that oppressive and hierarchical societies impose on our understanding of nature.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, in Hegel, the reality of nature appears only as an aspect and as a result of the intellect. As Marx pointed out: "Hegel accordingly conceived the illusory idea that the real world is the result of thinking, which causes its own synthesis, its own deepening, and its own movement; whereas the method of advancing from the abstract to the concrete is simply the way in which thinking assimilates the concrete and reproduces it as a concrete mental category."<sup>37</sup> Thus, nature remains essentially a product of the intellect, and its dialectic is limited to a beginning

<sup>34</sup> Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 112.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>37</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Salomea W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow, and London: Progress, Lawrence & Wishart, 1981), 122-123.

and an end of the Idea. Thus, Hegel favors a subjective conception of nature. Instead, Bookchin sees human as an active agent who knows and intervenes, who is himself a part of nature and not just a subjective observer.

Moreover, for Bookchin, nature is not a form of expression of the mind, as in Hegel, but the spirit is an offspring of nature. The spirit develops and evolves over time, and that is why it has its own evolutionary history.<sup>38</sup> The spirit is authentic and can comprehend its own story; it can understand the conditions and aspects of its development. The clearer gaze it is on this introspection, the clearer it is when it is about to perceive and enter into the essence of nature.

Bookchin's view is realistic because it offers a different view of the dialectical relationship between human and nature. Moreover, an element that was not sufficiently appraised by revolutionary dialectical philosophers such as Marx or Engels is the element of *motion* (kinisi). For example, the importance and value of movement, in which he insisted that Aristotle to explain the creation and operation of the universe in *Physics*,<sup>39</sup> is not utilized as it should be in modern dialectics. We cannot overlook the fact that today the natural sciences emphasize the element of motion and change. Dialectics is the pre-eminent theory that emphasizes the element of becoming, change, destruction, composition and rebirth. But the movement itself is an important fact in the controversy between constructivism and essentialism.

If we dwell a little on the element of motion, as understood by Bookchin's dialectical naturalism, then perhaps we can clearly see the essence of nature and overcome the obstacles that constructivism puts in front of us. We think the answer lies in the images of nature that constructivism offers us. Another problem we find in the constructivist approach to nature is that it offers us static and fragmentary shapes for nature. The images we have of nature are like static glimpses of moments. For example, environmental historians talk about the romantic nature of the Renaissance and represent/photograph a specific period of time with specific characteristics. Even the concept of evolution from one period to another is presented as part of a wider frame, a larger image. It is likely that in the case of evolution, this big image is moving, showing us these different phases just like the magic images in the known children's old game, "The View-Master." When turned left, right, up or down they show something different. But even these images are characterized by immobility because they enclose the selected elements. After all, in the

---

<sup>38</sup> Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 81.

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, 241b 34-267b 26.

context of constructivism, it is acceptable that specific elements are selected, based on each narrative about nature. But this is only a part of our reality and narrative.

Dialectic focuses on the evolutionary course of things capturing the constant dynamics of reality. It can explain the interrelation of all those fragmentary elements that make up reality. It can build a seemingly chaotic patchwork into an organic and cohesive whole. Even a holistic approach to theories of environmental ethics, such as Arne Naess' deep ecology or Aldo Leopold's Earth ethics, can work better in this dialectical context, although Bookchin himself saw them as rivals in his own right, social ecology.

#### IV. Conclusion

Overall, the phrase "essence of nature" seems by itself tricky and inaccessible. The efforts of science and philosophy to approach it have been titanic. The crucial question, however, as to whether it is possible to make this substance known is not answered by scientific approaches or relativistic and subjective perspectives. We need a system that will provide an outlet to current concerns, particularly an environmental philosophy that can bridge the gap between theory and practice of modern environmental movements. Murray Bookchin with his social ecology and dialectical naturalism overcomes the dilemmas of the constructivist approach to nature and brings us one step closer to vanquish the dichotomy between man and nature, while responding to the demands of the global environmental movement. The current situation of the planet mandates we alter our ideology regarding the world which includes how we perceive the environment as well as non-human animals. Practical ethics is crucial at this point in time so as to ensure environmental sustainability and the viability of our own existence. Thus, applying this philosophical framework to specific environmental contexts, social and intellectual purposes could be advantageous for a responsible interaction with our planet.

#### **Author contribution statement**

Both authors contributed equally to the conception, design, and authorship of this paper. Both authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

## References

Althusser, Louis. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological States Apparatuses*. Translated by G. M. Goshgarian. London, and New York: Verso, 2014.

Aristotle. *Physics*. Volume I: Books 1-4. Translated by Philip H. Wicksteed, and Francis M. Cornford. Loeb Classical Library 228. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957.

Biehl, Janet. *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*. Boston: South and Press, 1991.

Bookchin, Murray. *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Montreal, and New York: Black Rose Books, 1991.

Bookchin, Murray. *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism*. Montreal, and New York: Black Rose Books, 1995.

Collingwood, Robin G. *The Idea of Nature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1945.

Delanty, Gerard. *Social Science*. Buckingham: Open University, 1997.

Descola, Philippe, and Gisli Palsson. "Introduction." In *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by Philippe Descola, and Gisli Palsson, 1-21. London, and New York: Routledge, 1996.

Ellis, Brian. *The Philosophy of Nature: A Guide to the New Essentialism*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002.

Engels, Friedrich. "Dialectics of Nature." In Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, 313-734. New York: International Publishers, 1987.

Foucault, Michel. *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966.

Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.



Howell, Signe. "Nature in Culture or Culture in Nature? Chewong Ideas of 'Humans' and Other Species." In *Nature and Society*, edited by Philippe Descola, and Gisli Palsson, 127-144. London, and New York: Routledge, 1996.

Ingold, Tim. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London, and New York: Routledge, 2000.

Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Salomea W. Ryazanskaya. Moscow, and London: Progress, Lawrence & Wishart, 1981.

Serres, Michel. *The Natural Contract*. Translated by Elizabeth MacArthur, and William Paulson. Ann Arbor, MA: The University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Sextus, Empiricus. *Against Professors*. Translated by Robert G. Bury. Loeb Classical Library 382. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949.