

Issue One

Things Beyond Our Control: On the Distinction Between Nature and Art

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The relationship between nature and art is as old as humanity itself. Genesis places our original parents in the midst of a garden—an artifact—which tells us (at least) two important things about the relationship between nature, human nature, and artifice. First, the *human* world is always in some sense the *built* world, the world touched and modified by human hands, and this is leaving aside the artifact of human language and the many poetic creations that we inhabit and that unconsciously guide our thought and action. From the original garden we move to homes and to cities. *Homo faber* may not be the very essence of man created in the *imago dei* but it is the inexorable consequence. The co-penetration of art and nature belongs to our original, properly human condition, and this co-penetration has now advanced to such a degree that their separation is unimaginable. Second, the image of the garden perhaps tells us something about the archetypal relation between nature and art that illuminates the original meaning of ‘dominion’ and provides something of a criterion for evaluating human *technē*, even when human artifice involves a necessary and unavoidable element of violence. The gardener stands in a relation to nature analogous to grace, not destroying it but completing it, bringing it to realize internal possibilities, and indeed manifest a beauty, that it could not achieve on its own.

If the relationship between nature and art is as old as humanity, reflection on their inextricable relationship is as old as philosophy. Aristotle gave this reflection its canonical form, in what would become something of a maxim for the subsequent tradition, when he said that art imitates nature. There is both a positive and a negative sense to this maxim. As Robert Spaemann saw, to say that art imitates nature is to say that we have conferred on artifacts a kind of integrity analogous to self-hood. This is most obvious in those artifacts made to convey beauty, which have an intrinsic worth. We think it shameful to disfigure the face of the *Pieta*. But it is also true of artifacts built for utility. Think of the way a traditional craftsman cares for, and thus honors, his tools. It would be similarly shameful to misuse them. This “borrowed self-hood” is perhaps one reason why our artifacts so often act as a mirror in whose image we then understand ourselves. Hans Jonas observed that it is a seemingly irresistible human temptation to understand our artifacts in the image of the human functions they replace and the replaced human functions in terms of the artifacts that supplant them. In the eighteenth century, it was the clock that provided the overarching image of ourselves and indeed the universe. Today it is information technologies, as in the case of so-called ‘artificial intelligence,’ which rests on a reduced understanding of reason. First we imagine that computing is thinking; then we reconceive thinking reductively as computing.

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The notion of a “borrowed” self-hood already points to the negative sense of the maxim. To say that art *imitates* nature is to say that a thing existing by nature has something that an artifact lacks—or better, *is* something that an artifact is not. Aristotle characterized this difference by the presence of *entelechia*, having or being one’s own end or project. A natural thing, exemplified most fully for Aristotle by *living* things, has its own source of movement and growth within itself. It subsists and maintains itself in being by receiving and metabolically assimilating its world to itself. It generates another like itself. And, of course, it is born rather than made, a fact reflected etymologically in the Latin, *natura* and one far too little reflected upon. It means, among other things, that the “project” which living things are is not something they themselves create, but something *received*. Artifacts do none of these things, a sign that the artifact stands in a different relation to its own being and “whatness” and exhibits a different kind of unity than a thing existing by nature. The unity and the “whatness” of a natural thing—a human being or a tree, for example—*ontologically* precedes its historical development as its cause and source. It is the “sake” in light of which its sequential, ordered development is intelligible. But the unity of an artifact does not precede its development, but only comes about as the end result of its piece-by-piece assembly. This is because an artifact is not its own project, but its maker’s. Its being does not properly belong to it. As Aquinas and Aristotle observed, *we* are the final end of artificial things.

All of this shows that the distinction between nature and art is a distinction between two different ways of being a thing. Yet the indivisible unity and interior horizon made intelligible through this distinction has largely been lost to view, with the result that the very notion of entity or “thinghood” is now at risk of being dissolved into the flux of “liquid modernity.” There are a number of factors, both philosophical and political, that contribute to this dissolution, but two deserve mention for their foundational importance to all the others. The first is the seventeenth-century conflation of this distinction, through which nature, reconceived in terms of the new mechanical physics, comes to be conceived *as* artifice. The second is rooted in the Romantic reaction of the nineteenth century, which arguably served to make the presuppositions of the mechanistic turn more explicit. The nineteenth century shifted the emphasis from *natura naturata*, nature as entity or substance, to *natura naturans*, nature as creative *process*. In light of this shift, one can still say that human artifacts like digital information systems, which are themselves non-linear dynamic processes, still imitate nature, albeit in this mode. But the danger that is now upon us is that the triumph of process has led to the reconceiving of things, ourselves included, as assemblages of processes, a conception which invites and even necessitates their conquest by technical means that would allow us to manipulate and control them. If natural things lack a given unity and integrity, if it is merely a historical process of trial and error that accidentally produced the artifact that is us, then there is nothing to prevent us from seizing hold of that process—through biotechnology and medicine, for example to remake our own nature. This is already occurring at a rapid pace, and on a social scale, in the transgender movement, but long before anyone foresaw this ideology on the horizon thinkers like Jonas and Leon Kass were warning of the dangers that followed from the combination of assisted reproductive technologies, genetic diagnosis and manipulation, and powerful pharmaceuticals, all of which threaten to erase the already thin line between medical ‘restoration’ (health) and ‘transformation.’ Were this line to be erased and were nature as substance to be replaced entirely by nature as process—and therefore as artifact—the inevitable result would be both posthuman and subhuman. Avoiding this fate will require us to rediscover the distinction between nature and art and to think anew about the very nature of things.

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