

A WORD STUDY OF “NATURE” AND “NATURAL”

- I. Introduction
 - A. Wide spectrum of usage of these words
 - B. Has created much ambiguity and misunderstanding
 - C. J. H. Bernard - "Few words have been the source of so much confusion in theology as the word 'nature'... The word only gives rise to ambiguity when we are using it in reference to questions which touch theology" (Hasting's *Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. 3. pgs. 493, 495)

- II. Brief history of the concepts and word usage of "nature" and "natural"
 - A. Although the history of the concepts could be explored in Egyptian thought, Hindu thought, etc., this study will limit historical observation to Greek and Judeo-Christian thought which have had the greatest influence on Western Euro-American thought and word-usage.
 - B. Hebrew thought
 1. The Hebrew language did not have equivalent words for "nature" and "natural" as we use them today.
 2. Hebrew thought as it related Yahweh to the created order.
 - a. Yahweh was singular Creator who brought the created world into being.
 - b. Created world was a manifestation of God's power, goodness, nature, character and glory (cf. Ps. 19:1-6; 29:1-9)
 - c. Processes of created world governed, regulated, sustained, and providentially preserved by Yahweh.
 - d. Yahweh, as Creator, was distinct from created world, unconditioned and uncontingent on physical processes.
 - e. When created world connected with "gods", the result was idolatry.
 - f. Despite Yahweh's attempt to be personally involved in life of Israel in feasts, tabernacle, temple, etc., the Jewish peoples tended to
 - (1) to view Yahweh as a detached, almost deistic, monad
 - (2) to overemphasize the transcendence of God apart from created world
 - (3) to view God as arbitrary Law-giver to regulated created order.
 - (4) There was no sense of "natural law," just God's Law, primarily in the Mosaic Law.
 - C. Greek thought
 1. Our contemporary Western thinking about "nature" and "natural" are derived primarily from Greek thought.
 2. The primary words for "nature" and "natural" in the Greek language were *phusis*, *phusikos* and *phusikôs*.
 - a. Derived from Greek root *phu*, meaning "being" or "presence"
 - b. *phusis* carried with it the concept of origin, source, commencement and descent.
 - c. The English words "physical" and "physics" are derived from *phusis*.
 3. Brief history of Greek thought
 - a. Early Greek thought
 - (1) Pantheon of polytheistic Greek gods emanated from Mt. Olympus — Zeus *et al.* Types of nature-gods.
 - (2) Physical elements of earth, air, fire and water were regarded as the substances from which the world was constructed.
 - b. Plato
 - (1) Moved away from identifying physical world as *phusis*

- (a) abstract forms expressed in tangible nature
 - (b) emphasized the knowledge of the nature of things
 - (c) essential nature realized in rational conceptualization
 - (2) Dualistic separation of physical from spiritual
 - (a) abstract spiritual and rational is good
 - (b) tangible physical is evil
 - (c) hierarchical chain to mediate
 - c. Aristotle
 - (1) Moved toward a more monotheistic concept
 - (a) the "Unmoved Mover" is responsible for and operates within the natural order
 - (b) the "Universal Mind" is expressed in the rationality of nature.
 - (2) Such a primal force moves all things in the natural order to achieve their teleological objective.
 - 4. Greek thought in general
 - a. Had two broad concepts of nature
 - (1) Nature as universal source of all things
 - (2) Nature as the constitution and characteristics of all things
 - b. In this broad, dualistic concept of nature, there was a tendency to merge concepts of deity with the physical world, often in forms of pantheistic immanence.
 - c. Rationality, as the primary essence of deity, was inherently and intrinsically expressed in the natural world.
 - 5. Later transference of Greek thought and language into Latin language.
 - a. The Latin words used were *natura* and *naturalis*
 - (1) Derived from root words of *natus* and *nativus*, meaning "to be born" or "to come into being or existence by birth". (English "nativity" derived from such)
 - (2) Questionable whether Latin words were necessarily equivalent to the Greek words.
 - (3) English words "nature" and "natural" derived from these Latin words.
 - b. The Latin words were broadened to mean
 - (1) inborn, innate condition of physical order
 - (2) essential, basic qualities of a physical object
 - (3) normative, uniformity of physical order
 - (4) personified rational soul of the universe, as in Greek.
- D. Christian thought
- 1. Christocentric emphasis
 - a. Jesus Christ identified as preexistent Creator (cf. Jn. 1:1-4; Col. 1:16,17; Heb. 1:2)
 - b. Jesus explained God's personal concern for created order (cf. Matt. 5:45; 10:29)
 - c. There is divine teleological intent for created order to glorify God.
 - d. No antithesis between natural and supernatural. God in Christ works naturally and supernaturally.
 - e. By incarnation God invests Himself within the physical word as creature-man in Jesus Christ.
 - 2. Distinctives of Christian thought concerning God and created order
 - a. Countered overly transcendent and detached view of Hebrew thought.
 - b. Revised the Greek concepts of the immanence.
 - (1) Greek immanence posited divine as inherent, intrinsic, innate in natural order, necessarily expressed in essential rationality

- (2) Christian immanence explains the indwelling of God in man in spiritual union, whereby He becomes the identity of the creature-man.
 - (a) This retains the distinction of Creator and creature
 - (b) This allows for balance of immanence and transcendence.
- (3) Dynamic means of initiating and maintaining this immanence is by grace through faith. (cf. Eph. 2:5,8)
 - (a) Created order is not independent, autonomous or self-generative.
 - (b) Man, in particular, is a dependent, derivative, receptive and contingent creature.
 - (c) God's action of grace in Jesus Christ is conditioned by the freedom of man's choice of receptivity.
 - [1] This is not the mysticism of inner absorption or divinization.
 - [2] This is not the Gnosticism of dualistic separation seeking acquisition by knowledge.
- 3. Development of Christian thought
 - a. Early development of Christian thought involved Hebrew peoples often using Greek language.
 - b. New Testament written in *koine* Greek
 - (1) employs Greek words *phusis*, *phusikos* and *phusikôs*
 - (a) Relative infrequency compared to usage in Greek literature.
 - (2) predominantly employed in vocabulary of apostle Paul
 - (a) Paul reared in context of Greek culture in Tarsus
 - (b) In using these Greek words Paul accepts some of the Greek concepts that they conveyed.
 - c. In the early centuries of the extension of Christianity within the Greek world there was an Hellenizing absorption of Greek thought into Christian thought, the pollution of which remains to this day.

III. Contemporary English use and definition of the words "nature" and "natural"

- A. The English words are derived from the Latin words *natura* and *naturalis*
- B. They are closely associated with the English words "physical" and "physics", derived from the Greek words *phusis* and *phusikos*.
- C. Some meanings of the word "nature"
 - 1. essential character, essence
 - 2. constitution, constituency
 - 3. qualities that comprise, attributes, traits, properties, features
 - 4. inborn character, hereditary, birth condition, congenital, genetic
 - 5. intrinsicity, inherency, innateness
 - 6. instincts, desires, appetites, drives
 - 7. kind, species, genre, type, category, class, order
 - 8. materiality, phenomena, physicality
 - 9. totality of all things in space and time, universe
 - 10. power, force, causality, self-existent generation, independent function
 - 11. primitive scenery
 - 12. disposition, temperament
- D. Some meanings of the word "natural"
 - 1. pertaining to physical order - natural science, natural history
 - 2. original or primitive state of physical order - natural state, "back to nature"
 - 3. primal, virginal, unaffected, wild, raw, not artificial - natural foods

4. realistic, true to life - natural likeness
 5. normative, regular, uniformity - natural law
 6. existing in the physical order - natural resources
 7. produced in the physical order - natural selection
 8. expected course of action, typical, customary - natural behavior
 9. plain, simple, common, straight-forward, authentic
 10. contrasted with supernatural - natural revelation, natural theology
 11. innate, inherent, instinctual, intuitive abilities - natural talent
- E. Some meanings of the word "naturally"
1. normally, usually, generally, habitually
 2. logically expected, consequently, of necessity, as a result
 3. by birth, innately
- F. Some meanings of the words "naturalism" and "naturalist"
1. one who appreciates and studies physical phenomena
 2. realistic portrayal of the physical order; realism in art or literature
 3. advocate of primitive state; environmental purist; uncultivated, untouched
 4. when the action or thought is regarded as caused by instinctual abilities
 5. advocacy of the physical order as the only phenomena, the whole of reality; denial of supernatural; materialism, physicalism, scientism, epiphenomenalism, mechanism, instrumentalism, substantialism, spacio-temporalism, humanism, positivism, nominalism...
- G. Some meanings of the words "naturism" and "naturalist"
1. previously equivalent and synonymous with "naturalism" and "naturalist"
 2. contemporary usage applies to nudism, natural state of undress, au natural particularly in natural, physical environment.
- IV. Biblical use of the words "nature" and "natural"
- A. Hebrew language of Old Testament
1. Did not have equivalent words for "nature" and "natural"
 2. In Septuagint (Greek translation of Hebrew Old Testament) *phusis* and *phusikos* are not used in canonical texts, but are used in apocryphal texts (cf. Wisdom 7:20; 13:1; 19:20; 3 Macc. 3:29; 4 Macc. 1:20; 5:8,25; 13:27; 15:25; 16:3)
 2. English translations sometime use the words: ex. 2 usages in NASB
Ezek. 44:31- "bird or beast which has died a natural death" (lit. in Hebrew means "which is a corpse")
Dan. 10:8 - "my natural color turned to a deathly pallor" (lit. in Hebrew - "my glory was turned into corruption")
- B. Greek language of New Testament
1. Primary Greek words *phusis* and *phusikos*, as used in New Testament
Rom. 1:26 - "women exchanged *natural* function for *unnatural* (contrary to nature)
Rom. 1:27 - "men abandoned *natural* function"
Rom. 2:14 - "when Gentiles do *instinctively* the things of the Law"
Rom. 2:27 - "he who is *physically* uncircumcised"
Rom. 11:21 - "God did not spare the *natural* branches"
Rom. 11:24 - "what is by *nature* a wild olive tree...grafted contrary to *nature* into a cultivated olive tree...how much more the *natural* branches grafted into olive tree"
I Cor. 11:14 - "does not *nature* teach you that a man with long hair; it is a dishonor?"
Gal. 2:15 - "we are Jews by *nature*, and not sinners from among Gentiles"
Gal. 4:8 - "you were slaves to those which by *nature* are not gods"
Eph. 2:3 - "you were by *nature* children of wrath"

James 3:7 - "every *species* of beasts and birds...has been tamed by the human *race* (nature of the man)"

II Pet. 1:4 - "you might become partakers of the divine *nature*"

II Pet. 2:12 - "creatures of *instinct*"

Jude 10 - "the things they know by *instinct*"

a. To what extent are these usages influenced by Greek thought?

b. Is Paul employing these words with Greek concepts in mind?

2. NASB also translates *theios* and *theiotes* (divine, Godhead, deity) as "nature"

Acts 17:29 - "ought not think the *Divine nature* is like gold or silver"

Rom. 1:20 - "His eternal power and *divine nature*"

3. NASB also translates *homoioopathes* (like urgings or passions) as "nature"

Acts 14:15 - "men of the same *nature* as you"

James 5:17 - "Elijah was a man with a *nature* like ours"

4. NASB also translates *hupostastis* (understanding or confidence) as "nature"

Heb. 1:3 - "the exact representation of His *nature*"

5. NASB translates *psuchikos* (soulical) as "natural"

I Cor. 2:14 - "a *natural* man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God"

I Cor. 15:44,46 - "*natural* body...*natural* body...*natural*"

James 3:15 - "wisdom that is earthly, *natural*, demonic"

6. NASB translates *genesis* (come into being, born) as "natural"

James 1:23 - "a man who looks at his *natural* face in a mirror"

7. NIV repeatedly translates *sarx* (flesh) as "sinful nature"

Rom. 7:5,18,25; 8:3,4,5,8,9,12,13

I Cor. 5:5

Gal. 5:13,16,17,17,19,24; 6:8,8

Eph. 2:3

Col. 2:11,13

II Pet. 2:10,18

V. Consideration of the terms "human nature" and "the nature of man"

A. Does man have a nature?

B. Is there such a thing as "human nature"?

C. If so, what is the "nature" of man?

D. Does the "nature of man" have to do with...

1. Constitution?

a. trichotomy?

b. dichotomy?

c. unified, holistic function?

2. Physicality, physiological function, strength, superiority?

a. mortality?

b. corruptibility?

c. physical talents?

3. Psychological function?

a. rationality? intelligence?

b. affection, emotion, intuition, sensate ability?

c. consciousness?

d. volition, free-will, freedom of choice, free agency?

e. moral choice?

f. independent self-determination

4. Spiritual function or capability?

a. constituted spiritual being?

b. derived spiritual source or origin?

c. depravity, fallenness, sinfulness, unregeneracy?

d. union with God, regeneracy?

5. Created condition?
 - a. humanness, creatureliness?
 - b. choosing creature?
 6. Birth condition?
 - a. innocence?
 - b. consciousness?
 - c. nature vs. nurture?
 7. Character?
 - a. goodness?
 - b. sinfulness, evilness?
 8. Temperament, disposition, personality?
 9. Ethnicity?
 10. Gender?
 11. Behavioral patterns?
 - a. inner propensities and tendencies?
 - b. the “flesh”?
 12. Morality?
 - a. righteousness?
 - b. selfishness, worldliness, sinfulness?
 - c. innate sense of “ought” to conform to normative acceptability?
 - d. amoral?
 13. Inherent, intrinsic, innate characteristics of man?
 14. The “image of God” in man?
 - a. something “like” God in man?
 - b. attributes of God invested in man?
 - c. essential “godness” in man?
 15. Independent function of man?
 - a. autonomy?
 - b. self-determination?
 - c. self-governance?
 - d. self-potentiality?
 - e. self-causation?
 - f. self-generation?
 16. Derivativeness?
 - a. dependency?
 - b. contingency?
 - c. receptivity?
- E. What is a “natural man” (cf. I Cor. 2:14)
- F. Is “human nature” or the “nature of man” a Biblical concept or term?
- G. Some have concluded that these are illegitimate terms evidencing the extent to which our language and thinking has been influenced by Greek thought.
- “We humans have got altogether on the wrong foot by our universal acceptance of the belief that, as humans, we have a ‘human nature’ by which we function. I find the truth of God’s Word to be that we humans have no nature. ...the nature of a man is the kind of spirit which motivates him and is expressed by his soul-body function. We humans are on earth to contain and express, not ourselves, but solely the nature of the deity in us.” (Norman Grubb)
- VI. The popular doctrine of “two natures” in the Christian.
- A. Often alleged to be based on the doctrine of “two natures” in the person of Jesus Christ — deity and humanity, divine nature and human nature.
 - B. Many terms used in explanation of alleged “two natures”
 1. sin-nature
 2. sinful-nature

3. fallen-nature
4. Adam-nature
5. Adamic-nature
6. old-nature
7. depraved-nature
8. human nature
9. flesh-nature
10. new-nature
11. None of these terms has any basis in translation from the Greek text of the New Testament.

C. Many Christian teachers have recognized the illegitimacy of the “two natures” doctrine.

“Were it not for a secondary meaning of the word ‘nature,’ it would not be a proper designation as it is now being used (as ‘sin-nature’)” (L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2)

“The ‘two natures’ theory is unscriptural, self-contradictory and baneful.” (J. Sidlow Baxter, *His Deeper Work in Us*.)

“It is a serious misunderstanding to think of yourself as having both an old and new nature. We do not have a dual personality.” (John MacArthur)

VII. Seeking clarification of thought and usage of the word “nature” in our Christian theology.

A. Theological foundations

1. Judeo-Christian theology

- a. commences with God — His nature and character.
- b. maintains distinction of Creator and creature
- c. recognizes the divine teleological intent to express His divine nature in human behavior for His own glory.

2. Christian theology, in particular

- a. recognizes the inability of man to self-create character (cf. Jn. 15:5; II Cor. 3:5)
- b. accepts the incarnational investment of God in man on the basis of the redemptive work of the incarnate Son of God.
- c. understands the necessity of regenerative restoration of the divine nature in man by the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ. (cf. II Peter 1:4)
- d. accepts the derivativeness of man as a dependent and contingent creature designed to be spiritually receptive.

“To Christian thinkers the primary distinction has been between the underivative creativity of God and the derivativeness and dependence of nature.” (Article on “Nature, Philosophical Ideas of” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.)

B. Biblical references to man and “nature” or “natural”

1. The New Testament usages

a. Refer to...

- (1). superiority of humanity over animals - James 3:7
- (2). false superiority of Jews over Gentiles - Gal. 2:14
- (3). behavior conforming to divine intent - Rom. 2:14
- (4). typical physical condition - Rom. 2:27
- (5). normative sexual relationships - Rom. 1:26,27
- (6). normative cultural acceptability - II Cor. 11:14
- (7). spiritual condition associated with evil spirit - Eph. 2:3
- (8). patterns of evil and destructive behavior - II Pet. 2:12; Jude 10

b. Do not refer to...

- (1) autonomous empowerment of man

- (2) independent potentiality of man to generate character of either goodness or evil, righteousness or sinfulness
 - (3) inherent or intrinsic human abilities of self-determination
 - (4) implicit god-likeness in man (reason, free agency, etc.)
 - 2. Primary Biblical understanding of “nature” in reference to man pertains to his spiritual condition.
 - a. “A creature’s nature and essence is determined by its relation to God.” (H. Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*)
 - b. “Nature” is primarily understood as the essential character of a spiritual being that indwells and manifests himself in human behavior.
 - (1) God — righteousness, goodness, love
 - (2) Satan — sinfulness, evil, selfishness
 - c. The nature of man is the nature of the spiritual personage that indwells him, and is the basis of his spiritual identity — derived nature.
 - (1) Spiritual condition associated with the nature of the diabolic spirit (cf. Eph. 2:3)
 - (2) Spiritual condition associated with the nature of the divine nature (cf. II Peter 1:4)
 - d. This interpretation best maintains the original meanings of *phusis*
 - (1) root meaning of “being” or “presence”
 - (2) linguistic meaning of “source” and “origin”
- C. The interpretation herein espoused...
 - 1. Retains the distinction of Creator and creature, without monistic merging whereby man is absorbed in deity or divinized.
 - 2. Allows for a balance between transcendence and immanence in God’s relationship with man.
 - 3. Avoids a dualistic antithesis of natural and supernatural; physical and spiritual
 - 4. Denies an innate moral character to man of either goodness or sinfulness.
 - 5. Denies that man has inherent divine abilities.
 - 6. Recognizes the capabilities and functions of man’s created humanness in rationality, affection and volitional freedom.
 - 7. Posits that man can only function as the man that God intended him to be when the divine nature is restored to the spirit of man in regeneration, and is derivatively allowed to be expressed in sanctification unto the glory of God.

VIII. Conclusion

A. Observations

“The true religion conception (of nature)...refers every operation of phenomenal force to the Agency of Supreme Mind, direction and ordering it in wisdom.” (J. H. Bernard. Article on “Nature” in *Hasting’s Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. 3. pg. 495).

“a writer who is aware of this web of ambiguities in “natural” and “nature” may well decide to choose - whenever possible - words of greater precision and stability of meaning.” (Article on “Nature, Philosophical Ideas of” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.)

B. It is the author’s personal resolve

- 1. To refer to “created order” or “physical order” instead of “natural world” or “Nature.”
- 2. To refer to the “created condition of man” in his “humanness” or “creatureliness” (including rationality and freedom of choice) instead of “human nature” or the “nature of man.”
- 3. To refer to “nature” in reference to man only in terms of spiritual condition in association with the spiritual indwelling and expression of God or Satan.