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A Reflection on *the Voice of the Silence*, No. 16

“Help nature and work on with her . . .”

—*The Voice of the Silence*

As human beings, endowed with the faculty of thought and the ability to make choices, how are we to view our relationship with nature? Western science has taken the approach of observing and investigating nature (*naturam observare*), resulting in amazing discoveries and technological advances. Another school of thought urges us to follow nature (*naturam sequi*), the implication being that nature serves as an exemplar of moral principles. The latter view is expressed in this passage from *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) by Alexander Pope:

First follow *Nature*, and your judgment frame
By her just standard, which is still the same:
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchang'd, and universal light,
Life, force, and beauty, must to all impart,
At once the source, and end, and test of art.

A contrarian view is encapsulated in Tennyson's oft quoted phrase “Nature, red in tooth and claw,” a graphic depiction of predatory violence occurring daily in the natural world. To those who hold nature as a moral beacon for humanity, J. S. Mill would argue:

The order of nature, in so far as unmodified by man, is such as no being, whose attributes are justice and benevolence, would have made with the intention that his rational creatures should follow it as an example. . . . In sober truth, nearly all the things which men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another are nature's every-day performances. — *On Nature* (1874)

The raw forces of nature have wreaked death, destruction, and misery on a scale of epic proportions, accomplishing this by means of droughts and pestilence, fire and floods, tsunamis and earthquakes, cyclones and tornados, extreme heat and bone-numbing cold—all deadly weapons that have destroyed property, lives, and entire cities.

So, who is correct, Pope or Mill? An unbridgeable chasm seems to separate their views. Perhaps they are both right, depending on the definition of nature being used. If I may borrow the words of H. P. Blavatsky, one is thinking of the “eternal and uncreate nature,” whereas the other is looking only at the “flitting shadows and finite unrealities.”

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