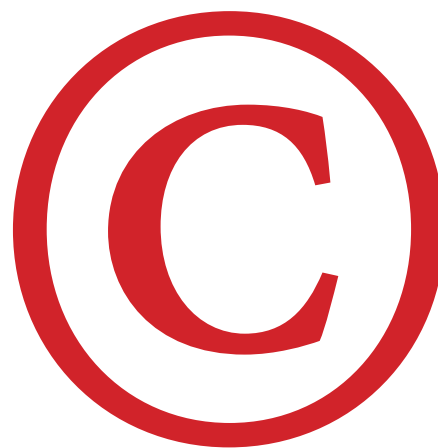


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SOPHIA

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Supposing truth to be a woman—what then? Isn't the suspicion well founded that all philosophers, at least the dogmatists, have known little about women? The ghastry seriousness, the gauche obtuseness that have been their approach to truth, have been clumsy and inappropriate means to attract a woman?

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, from his preface to
Beyond Good and Evil, 1886¹

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¹ Translated by SCOTT ABBOTT from *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1886.

The Fallacy of the Human/Nature Divide

by David R. Keller

I

From Socrates' claim that "trees and open country won't teach me a thing, whereas people in the town do," the idea of a fundamental human/nature divide has permeated Western thought.

I, too, held this notion as I saw a funnel cloud develop over downtown Salt Lake City. Like the confident observer in Caspar David Friedrich's painting *The Wanderer*, I supposed that I could observe the spectacle in its full awesomeness and sublimity, but from a *safe distance*—an assumption that turned out to be a potentially fatal mistake.

August 11, 1999 started out as a normal study day. I had been doing one of my favorite things: sitting in a café, reading, writing, looking out the window. A thunderhead formed over the valley, gradually growing taller and darker. What was unusual, I thought, was that the underside of the cloud was so black and "muscular"—what meteorologists call a mammatus cloud formation, or mamma. The pouch-like texture was beautiful and ominous, yet there was no lightning or rain.

It was time to head to the University of Utah library. Halfway there,

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rated Athenians from barbarism beyond the wall. In this way, a constellation of historical factors—agricultural, political, and so on—converged to foster the socially-constructed conception of human separateness from nature.

Myriad technological advances continued to promulgate the idea of a human/nonhuman divide. Building innovations, for example, have substantially increased the places considered habitable. Few people wanted to live in the Florida panhandle or the desert Southwest before the development of air conditioning. Concrete, steel, and glass can withstand forces far greater than the mud and timber structures of the past. I flew to Miami from Quito shortly after hurricane Andrew, and was startled by the degree to which modern buildings can take a pounding: the sturdy well-built homes of the affluent along the Atlantic coast remained intact, while entire neighborhoods of flimsy homes further inland were completely demolished.

Many students of the Occidental tradition have pointed to the lessons about the nature/culture relationship hidden in the history of technology. My thesis is that our success in increasing the amount of physical space that we can manipulate ('man,' in Old English, meaning "human being") has promoted a false sense of security, a hypertrophic confidence in the extent to which nature can be controlled. This actual physical space corresponds to the social construct of "safe distance" or "safe space." The concept of safe space is the basis of distinguishing the human from nonhuman (that is, wild) nature—a central feature of the Western worldview.

Yet, not all of our socially-constructed beliefs actually fit reality. The concept of a fundamental human/nature divide is one of them. Safe physical space, the technological product of rationality, is conflated to the *concept* of safe space. In turn, the concept of safe space provides the justification for positing a rigid ontological boundary. Unfortunately, all safe physical space is ephemeral, and, in effect, doesn't exist; consequently the very concept of safe space (and by extension the human/nonhuman divide) is groundless. We might accurately call this erroneous conflation the "safe-space fallacy."

Immanuel Kant's famous notion of sublimity is a good example of the safe-space fallacy. According to Kant, a subject witness to a natural spectacle at once foreboding and beautiful may overcome the emotion of fear through the exercise of reason. Reason and moral agency provide a feeling of superiority and confidence when facing the vulgar

power of nature. Thus, for Kant, the experience of the sublime is premised on the subject's ability to transcend the danger of the situation rationally.

Kant's formulation of sublimity falls short of capturing the full complexity of the human/more-than-human dynamic. To witness something like a tornado and not feel both *awe* and *fear* would itself be unreasonable. The safe distance I thought I had—several miles—suddenly became the distance between my face and the windshield. The car protected me from the blast, but the threshold between the glass shattering or not must have been precariously thin. After experiencing the tornado, I characterize sublimity more as *fearful awe* than *calm amazement*. The funnel was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen, but the same aspects which made it beautiful also made it tragic: it killed, injured, destroyed.

Reflecting on the episode, I am convinced that any conceptual "safe space" functioning to distance wild nature is wholly transitory, and therefore, metaphysically speaking, a chimera. The fundamental ontology of the human condition is ecological interconnectedness with wild nature. With the fact that *Homo sapiens* is fundamentally embedded in wild nature comes the disconcerting realization that evolution and extinction co-occur: the very ecological processes which brought into existence humans and human culture will also put an end to humans and human culture. Like Shiva, the Hindu god whose dance simultaneously creates and destroys, these dual effects of natural process are interrelated—they are two manifestations of the same underlying phenomenon.

Inventing and making defines *humanness*. Playing musical instruments, practicing medicine, and catching flight are integral aspects of the human identity. Obviously, we cannot foreswear technology. I think, however, we need to reconceive it. We need a change in worldview by recognizing that one thing humans cannot make is an inviolable safe space; at best, we may distance ourselves, temporarily, from the nonhuman. Our goal should not be to transcend wild nature, but to discover new ways of living *within* it.

Acknowledgements:

Thanks to William Alder of the National Weather Service for help with the unique meteorological physics of this tornado, and to my auto mechanic Jim Keller for not being angry when I told him I had driven his car, which he had lent me, into the vortex of a F2 tornado.

I noticed that a swirling cloud body in the shape of an inverted cone was dropping from the mamma above, directly over downtown Salt Lake City! Astonished, I looked closer: the cloud had a distinct shape—an inverted cone—yet was boiling with turbulence. And it was swirling noticeably in a counter-clockwise direction.

It was an incredible sight, and I decided to try to get a better look from the Upper Avenues. As I drove, the cone became part of a full-fledged funnel cloud extending from the valley floor to the thunderhead. An enormous plume of swirling garbage was sucked into the sky—foam, cardboard, newspaper, dirt. And as far as I could tell, the funnel appeared to be stationary. "This is the biggest *hust-devil* I've ever seen!" I thought, knowing intuitively that this was a real *tornado*.

Instantly it got darker. Debris rained out of the sky. I turned into a dirt parking lot. A violent blast came directly at the windshield. No longer was the debris foam, paper, and small leafy branches: now two-by-fours and plywood hurled through the air. Cognizant of the danger, I shifted the car into reverse. I had backed up only few feet when an electrical wire fell across the roof of the car, accompanied by a loud crash. I stopped. Two feet behind the car lay a splintered power pole. A transformer hit the ground, spilling out a weird fluorescent green fluid. Glad that the power pole didn't crush the car or kill me, but afraid that the wire on the car was hot, I quickly pulled forward. The surge of wind waned, and hail was falling. The violent gust had lasted for only ten or fifteen seconds. After five minutes, the hail slackened, and I got out of the car and looked around.

The power pole that I almost backed under had been snapped off about ten feet above the ground. Nearby two other power poles had been downed. Wires criss-crossed the ground. A portion of a roof lay on the bare hillside. Dozens of trees were either uprooted or snapped. Debris was randomly scattered everywhere: lawn chairs, fragments of wood and insulation, shingles, a basket ball standard, a charcoal grill, a swamp cooler. Part of a roof hung in a pine tree. Half of one house was gone. Tangled venetian blinds dangled in the open air. A large wood beam punctured a large plate glass window, half inside the house, half outside. A black cloud of smoke rose above downtown.

Then it was dead calm. I stared at the house that lost its roof through a front window you could see kitchen cabinets and the refrigerator. The open sky above cast a strange grey light in the room, not normal for the inside of a house. Its roof lay at least a hundred yards away, to the west. Then the realization: the direction of the blast which

ripped the roof from the house was moving east to west, but the direction of the blast which came at the windshield was moving west to east. *I had been in the vortex!*

Later I learned that the genesis of this tornado was significantly different than tornadoes typical of the Midwest, while the later type are usually *descending*, this tornado was *ascending*. The tornado developed along a surface convergence zone of a northwestern breeze coming off the Great Salt Lake with a southerly wind. The convergence of these two surface air masses created, by the Coriolis effect, a weakly rotating system. As the thunderhead developed above, a particularly strong updraft occurred. The combination of these events resulted in a spinning, upward movement of air reaching tornadic intensity.

The tornado developed to the south-west of downtown, and traveled four miles to the north-east, passing over the Delta Center, skirting Temple Square (for Salt Lakers an example of God's will or sheer coincidence, depending on religious conviction), cutting a swath through the heavily forested Memory Grove park, advancing up the hillside to my "viewing" spot, and dissipating to the northeast beyond Ensign Peak. One person was killed and eighty people injured seriously. Three hundred buildings were damaged and thirty-four homes rendered uninhabitable. Hundreds of trees—especially precious in the desert—were destroyed.

II

My experience prompted me to revisit the question: Does the history of Western civilization involve the fallacious fabrication of a fundamental ontological divide between the human and nonhuman?

I believe the answer is yes. We have assumed that we can create a "safe distance" or "safe space" from that which we cannot control—*wild nature*. The boundary circumscribing this space is the divide between the human and nonhuman. This divide is fascinating, for certainly our nomadic forebears did not see themselves as "apart from nature." They were always *in nature*. There was no non-nature, no *wild, wilderness*, from which they shrank. But linear furrows and regular indentations must have generated a sharp contrast from flood and famine. Human beings became, in a sense, distanced from the rough vicissitudes of pre-agricultural life. The ancient Greeks, we know, saw the civil order within the city wall as totally distinct from the chaos outside the city. The *polis*, the political manifestation of rationality, sepa-