

© 2025 Joachim Ostermann. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

The Franciscan View of Nature and Natural Being

A talk at the Word on Fire conference
“Wonder: A Conference on Faith and Science. ”
Grapevine, TX, January 13, 2023.

Joachim Ostermann, OFM



The Franciscan View of Nature and Natural Being

Joachim Ostermann, OFM

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Francis_in_Ecstasy_\(Bellini\)#/media/File:Giovanni_Bellini_-_St._Francis_in_the_Desert_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Francis_in_Ecstasy_(Bellini)#/media/File:Giovanni_Bellini_-_St._Francis_in_the_Desert_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

What do Franciscans have to say about faith and science?

The heart of the faith and science conflict is a question regarding the human person. Do we have trust in our own reality—as the paradigm of individual being and being in community?

The knowledge of human nature is the context of science, not the other way around.

The way St. Francis understood fraternity is the specifically Franciscan approach to faith and science. It provides

a framework in which all knowledge of nature, including science, can be brought together.

From the encyclical letter *Laudato si'*: “There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology. When the human person is considered as simply one being among others, the product of chance or physical determinism, then our overall sense of responsibility wanes.”



The questions in faith and science:

The human person: Someone or something?

Human acting: Integrated with scientifically understood nature, or breaking the laws of nature?

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Jerome_in_Meditation_\(Caravaggio\)#/media/File:Sant_Jeroni_penitent_Montserrat.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Jerome_in_Meditation_(Caravaggio)#/media/File:Sant_Jeroni_penitent_Montserrat.jpg)

In the field of faith and science, we presuppose that both faith and science are credible.

To understand the difference between someone rather than something, consider an eddy in the water behind rocks, with a canoe and a canoeist in it. The eddy is just a feature in the stream that the canoeist uses. A feature has no identity and agency. Is the canoeist just a lasting feature in the temporal stream of material being?

Is it just like foam on waves? Nobody thinks that the foam steers the waves.

Are we protein computers or individual minds?

Is human acting as fundamentally transparent and natural as scientifically understood nature?

Is ethics grounded in nature in a way that seeks the good, rather than just a reproductive advantage? Or is human acting breaking the laws of nature, like some think of miracles?

It's not really about whether God fits into a scientifically understood nature. It's about whether we do.

To see ourselves, we need to ask what it is that we call nature.

- Human acting as acting in the reality of nature
- The possibility of dreams
- Awakening to reality by trust



https://www.wga.hu/html_m/g/giotto/padova/1joachim/joachi5.html

Nature is context: The non-human context in which human acting occurs.

This is flexible, relative to human acting, but not opposed to human acting.

Nature is not just a limitation. When we use machines, such as flying in airplanes, then we expand our powers.

But we are still acting in nature, as it is by understanding of nature that airplanes become possible.

Rather than drawing a strict line between nature and technology, we ask in what sense human acting is natural as we use these machines. Using a knife to carve

the turkey is natural, using the knife to settle a family squabble is not.

How do we know that nature is real? And if it is real, is it just a limitation, like something that captures and imprisons brains that long to be free!

Tell Spaemann's story for waking up to reality through trust in the goodness of others.

Is nature itself for us or against us? We do not know.

But the fact that trust works should give us some sense of optimism.

- Secular knowledge of nature exceeds scientific knowledge of nature
- Science separates nature and human concerns



<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fa/Surprised-Rousseau.jpg>

We also have good reasons to trust in science as knowledge of nature.

But there is more to nature than what science can see, and some of it has no place in the scientific knowledge of nature.

We tend to assume that everything natural is within nature's reach. But there is no real progress in understanding the fundamentals of life, consciousness, and language that intends the objects of consciousness.

But this is no excuse to let religion to fill any gaps in secular knowledge. We must ask secular questions about the human person first, because this is where science belongs.

Before we talk of religion, we must see how to properly speak in secular language of nature. We must overcome the separation between nature and human concerns that is introduced into our knowledge of nature by science.

The book of nature's language:

- The abstract symbolic language of science
- The concrete language of life
- The ethical language of natural humanity



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vassily_Kandinsky,_1913_-_Composition_7.jpg

Two points: First, Life and death cannot be in a superposition. But physical being can. Second, living being is not extended in time. But physical time has no spatially extended “now”.

The language of life is the language that captures real being in time. The dog eats because it is hungry; it is not just a homeostatic system. Being alive is not just a complicated way of being dead. Living beings is in matter but not the same as its matter.

Science is forgetful of life, and therefore also forgetful of ethics. The experience of

pain shows you that it is wrong to be in pain. Or a child playing by a dangerous windowsill calls us to aid. Beauty obliges us. Other animals oblige us not to abuse them.

Ethics is not the same as evolution of behavior. Reflexes that keep me from stumbling and falling are an evolutionary adaptation, but gravity is what I adapt to. In understanding ethics together with evolutionary biology, we discover nature's language of ethics. Ethics is the natural language of fully human acting



Characters and their stories in the book of nature

- Human beings
- Living beings
- Nonliving matter

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wanderer_above_the_Sea_of_Fog#/media/File:Caspar_David_Friedrich_-_Wanderer_above_the_sea_of_fog

Any good book has clear and distinct characters and stories. Not quarks and leptons.

When we say it is, or it is not, we are not just stating a fact but make an ethical commitment. A concrete natural being is a bearer of rights. Recognizing them does not start with quarks and leptons.

Consider a child's mental development that starts to carve the world into creatures. It is anthropomorphic, as the human form becomes the initial paradigm for one being and one word. Our language cannot be but anthropomorphic as it is meant for communicating human acts and experiences. But it need not be anthropocentric.

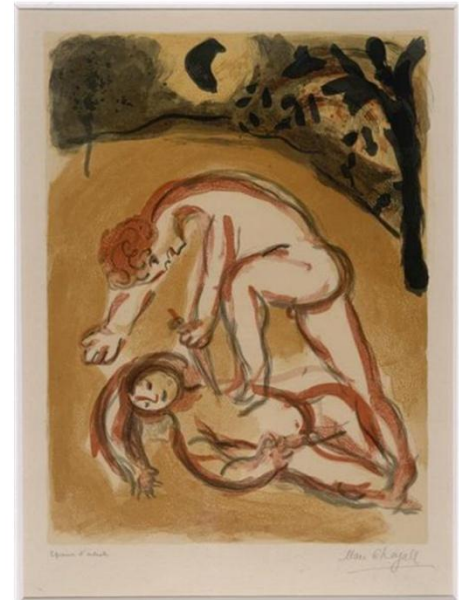
Living being begin in matter and leave matter behind when they end. What is left of the past in matter are the fossils and their traces found in our DNA—like the Neanderthal DNA. It is the story of life on earth. In the story of life, we learn that our anthropomorphic language is suitable to leave anthropocentrism behind.

Matter is the substrate. It has its own development in time, the story of cosmology tells. It is a profoundly rational story of unfolding by unchanging laws. It is a world as a whole, without individual creatures, but the story of their material substrate as a whole. But it comes last in understanding nature, not first.



<https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/adam-and-eve-expelled-from-paradise-1961-6>
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/cain-and-abel-1960>

- Human nature as fallen
- Nature red in tooth and claw
- Nature as an excuse for human violence



The inhumanity of humanity. This is what sets us apart. No animal can go against its nature, but we do.

Evolution answers nothing. Human violence is not animal violence, as we are aware of our ethical obligations towards our brothers and sisters. The original crime: Cain's murder of Abel.

Without God, we are absurd creatures in a rational creation. The cause of our fall and reconciliation with God are theological questions. The state of our fallenness is a secular fact. We can either turn to religion or abandon humanity.

When we turn to nature in our fallen state, forgetting our real humanity, all we see is violence: Nature red in tooth and

claw. Then it justifies our own acts of violence.

Can we really speak of suffering in animals, like we do? They do experience pain, but an animal's pain has a signal function without which the animal could not live. "Cycle of life" is the life of animals.

For human beings, the experience of pain is different, as we realize that we ought not be in pain, as we recognize the ethical obligation to not inflict pain. Our suffering is awareness of the absurdity of our existence. But this absurdity is a consequence of our separation from God. Which restates the secular fact of the fall in religious language.



- Human nature reconciled in Christ
- At peace in nature
- Speaking of reality in all three languages

https://www.artble.com/imgs/3/7/f/522624/stigmatization_of_st_francis.jpg

Francis as lover of nature or nature mystic makes sense unless because of his turning to Christ. Understanding human nature through Christ unlocks the proper anthropomorphic language of creation. Not just the language of ethics but also the language of life is distorted without Christ.

The language of life becomes the unbearable triviality of “circle of life” lyrics. How could human life find fulfillment in such trivial goo that goes

nowhere—literally, in circles, never ending and never ascending.

It is only through the life of Christ and understanding our life as mirroring his life that we can recover the full language of nature by speaking of life and ethics. Only then we can interpret all the new knowledge of nature by way of science.

By Christian faith, naturalism is not imitating nature, but it is about placing nature in the context of the Christian life.

- Fraternity in religious life
- Fraternity with creatures
- Recognition of natural rights



Holy Family Church in Port Alberni, BC, Ceramic Mural by Lorrain Malach, Photo by Joachim Ostermann

We do not turn to Christ and become like Christ by supernatural fiat or power of will. We need human context to open our hearts to God.

Franciscan life is fraternity to shape us. For Francis, the fraternity is the superior who shapes the brothers into better followers of Christ.

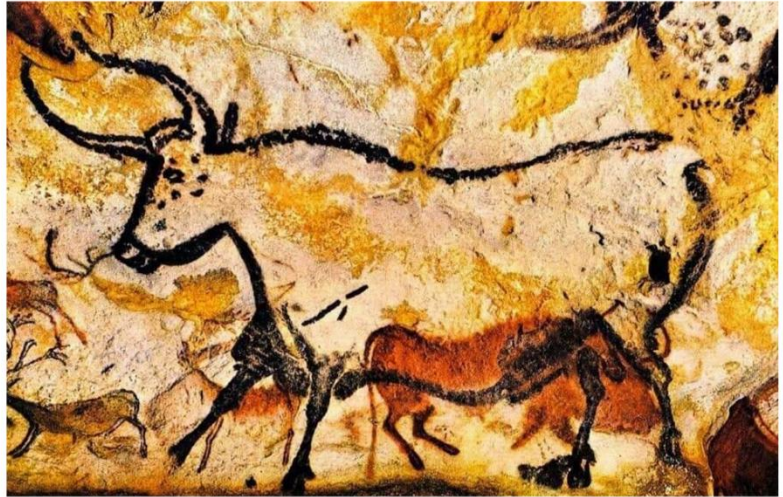
Being, dependence on care, and a duty to care are understood together in understanding human being. In relationships of care, we learn to speak the ethical language of nature.

Rights are what is due to someone or something so that being is meaningful.

As we discover the meaning of creatures, we recognize their rights.

Human rights begin with the right to be. An ethical actor cannot deny being to another ethical actor. It would deny the reality of the other one's meaning. The rest regarding particular rules is for politics—for better or worse. But the political process needs to be framed by a true understanding of human nature and nature more broadly. This includes understanding the importance of diversity in individual expressions of every aspect of human nature!

- Ecology and anthropology
- Rights of creatures
- Environmental stewardship



<https://www.domainedulac-dordogne.com/en/lascaux-2/>

Why does the faith and science project matter today?

Rights of creatures are not opposed to human rights. Human rights are not just libertarian rights over and against nature but natural rights, broadly understood.

How do we balance competing interests? We are not just caretakers of the status-quo. Neither conservancy nor economic exploitation are values in themselves.

Naïve naturalism is no guide. It's more along the lines of aesthetics. Context matters. Different choices will be made, dependent on circumstances. An aesthetic judgment must be learned,

through understanding the beauty of properly lived human life, the beauty of human nature, and nature itself.

Think of fears were there is no scientific argument for fear: Vaccines, cell phone towers, power lines. But the relationship that people have with their environment when incomprehensible technology encroaches on them is a legitimate concern.

Environmental stewardship is about the good life, grounded in the Christian view of the human person and nature as not a static design but as the continuing revelation of the inexhaustible living divine word.



Thank you!

If you have an interesting and short remark followed by a sentence that concludes with a question mark, then please say it now! I will be happy to answer it.

And if you want to say more and your question, if any, is really a concluding flourish of your speech, then meet me at the bar and buy me a beer, and I will be glad to listen.