

Slavoj Žižek: The end of Nature

The big ecological disasters of 2010 fit into the ancient cosmological model, in which the universe is made up of four basic elements: AIR, volcanic ash clouds from Iceland immobilizing airline traffic over Europe; EARTH, mudslides and earthquakes in China; FIRE, rendering Moscow almost unlivable; WATER, the tsunami in Indonesia, floods displacing millions in Pakistan.

Such recourse to traditional wisdom offers no true insight into the mysteries of our wild Mother Nature's whims, however. It's a consolation device, really, allowing us to avoid the question we all want to ask: Will more events of such magnitude turn up on nature's agenda for 2011?

In our disenchanted, post-religious, ultra-technological era, catastrophes can no longer be rendered meaningful as part of a natural cycle or as an expression of divine wrath. Ecological catastrophes — which we can view continually and close-up, thanks to our 24/7 plugged-in world — become the meaningless intrusions of a blind, destructive rage. It's as if we are witnessing the end of nature.

Today we look to scientific experts to know all. But they do not, and therein lies the problem. Science has transformed itself into specialized knowledge, offering an inconsistent array of conflicting explanations called "expert opinions." But if we blame the scientific-technological civilization for many of our difficulties, we cannot do without that same science to fix the damage — only scientists, after all, can "see" the ozone hole. Or, as a line from Wagner's "Parsifal" puts it, "The wound can only be healed by the spear that made it." There is no way back to pre-scientific holistic wisdom, to the world of Earth, Wind, Air and Fire.

While science can help us, it can't do the whole job. Instead of looking to science to stop our world from ending, we need to look at ourselves and learn to imagine and create a new world. At least for those of us in the West, it's difficult to accept being passive observers who must sit and watch as our fates are revealed.

LIVING WITH NATURE: STOICISM AND DAOISM

Jiyuan Yu

Both Stoicism and Daoism claim that the ideal way of living is to follow nature and that living with nature is the same as living virtuously. For the Stoics, “living in agreement with nature” (*homologoumenōs tēi phusei zēn*) or “following nature” (*akolouthōs tēi phusei zēn*)¹ is what constitutes happiness (*eudaimonia*, flourishing, living well), the ultimate end (*telos*) of human life. Correspondingly, the *Laozi* (chap. 25) states: “Man models himself on earth; earth on heaven; heaven on the way [*dao*], and the way on *ziran*.”² In this passage *ziran* is the supreme end which human beings emulate. The term *ziran*, which is used in modern Chinese to translate the English word “nature,” means literally “so on its own,” or “so of itself,”³ and has been translated as “what is spontaneously so,” “that which is naturally so,” “naturalness,” or “nature.” In the same spirit, the *Zhuangzi* holds that: “Whoever knows what Heaven does lives the lives generated by Heaven.”⁴

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. Though it is now dark, the wind still blows and roars in the wood, the waves still dash, and some creatures lull the rest with their notes. The repose is never complete. The wildest animals do not repose, but seek their prey now; the fox, and skunk, and rabbit, now roam the fields and woods without fear. They are Nature's watchmen,—links which connect the days of animated life.

Henry David Thoreau - Walden