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From Divinity to Instrumentalization: A Historical and Philosophical Portrait of Nature

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the historical and philosophical evolution of the human-nature relationship. Across history, philosophical thought has profoundly influenced how nature is perceived, transitioning from its reverence as a sacred order in ancient times to its instrumentalization in the modern era. This transformation, evident in the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and others, has significantly shaped humanity's alienation from nature and contributed to contemporary ecological crises. The paper discusses these shifts and examines the rise of romanticism and contemporary ecological philosophies—such as deep ecology, ecofeminism, social ecology, and the Gaia hypothesis—that propose reimagining this relationship. These philosophies advocate viewing nature as possessing intrinsic value and call for harmonizing human existence with the natural world. By analyzing philosophical foundations and their historical contexts, the article argues that addressing ecological crises requires a critical reassessment of the human-nature relationship. It concludes by proposing a new intellectual framework to foster sustainable and meaningful coexistence with nature, emphasizing the necessity of integrating ethical, cultural, and ecological perspectives into contemporary thought and practice.

Keywords: *Nature, Philosophy, Human-Nature Relationship, Ecological Crises, Sustainable Coexistence*

Tanrısallıktan Araçsallaştırmaya: Doğanın Tarihi ve Felsefi Portresi

ÖZET

Bu makale, insan-doğa ilişkisinin tarihsel ve felsefi evrimini incelemektedir. Tarih boyunca, felsefi düşünce, doğanın algılanış biçimini derinden etkilemiş, antik dönemde kutsal bir düzen olarak saygı gören doğa anlayışı, modern çağda araçsallaştırılmaya dönüşmüştür. Platon, Aristoteles, Descartes ve diğer düşünürlerin fikirlerinde açıkça görülen bu dönüşüm, insanlığın doğadan yabancılaşmasını şekillendirmiş ve günümüzdeki ekolojik krizlere katkıda bulunmuştur. Bu çalışma, söz konusu değişimleri tartışmakta ve romantizmin yükselişi ile derin ekoloji, ekofeminizm, sosyal ekoloji ve Gaia hipotezi gibi çağdaş ekolojik felsefeleri incelemektedir. Bu felsefeler, doğanın içsel bir değere sahip olduğu görüşünü benimseyerek, insan varlığını doğal dünyayla uyumlu hale getirme çağrısında bulunmaktadır. Felsefi temellerin ve tarihsel bağlamların analizine dayanarak, makale, ekolojik krizlerle başa çıkmanın insan-doğa ilişkisinin eleştirel bir şekilde yeniden değerlendirilmesini gerektirdiğini savunmaktadır. Çalışma, etik, kültürel ve ekolojik perspektiflerin çağdaş düşünce ve pratiğe entegre edilmesinin gerekliliğini vurgulayarak, doğayla sürdürülebilir ve anlamlı bir birlikteliği teşvik edecek yeni bir entelektüel çerçeve önerisiyle sonuçlanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Doğa, Felsefe, İnsan-Çevre İlişkisi, Ekolojik Krizler, Sürdürülebilir Bir Arada Yaşama*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Perceptions of nature play a critical role in understanding humanity's relationship with its environment, the resources it offers, and their usage. Historically, these perceptions have shaped human attitudes toward nature, influenced by cultural, social, and economic contexts. These perceptions have manifested differently throughout various periods of human history. In ancient times, nature was often viewed as a source of life, while in the modern era, issues like environmental problems and sustainability have come to the forefront. This evolution necessitates a redefinition of the human-nature relationship. Historically, the development of perceptions of nature has paralleled changes in humanity's respect and fear toward it. Early societies revered nature as a powerful force and approached it with rituals and reverence. Nature was central to human existence, with societies striving to align their lives with natural cycles. However, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, nature became a resource to be controlled and exploited by humans. This transformation led to environmental degradation and the emergence of ecological challenges (Marzluff et al. 2008; Russell et al. 2013; Moran, 2016).

Today, perceptions of nature are being reshaped by environmental awareness and sustainability concepts. Educational programs, in particular, play a significant role in fostering individuals' attitudes toward nature and enhancing their environmental sensitivity (Kahn et al. 2009; Hofstra & Huisingh, 2014). For instance, Demirhan (2020) notes that nature education programs positively impact gifted students' attitudes toward the environment. Such programs strengthen individuals' relationships with nature and increase their sensitivity to environmental issues.

Perception, in philosophical and cognitive terms, refers to the process by which individuals interpret sensory input to form a coherent understanding of the world. In the context of environmental philosophy, perception shapes how individuals and societies relate to the natural world, influencing not only attitudes and behaviors but also ethical and ontological positions (Berleant, 1992; Abram, 1996). While this paper focuses on historical-philosophical paradigms, the role of perception remains implicit in how each era conceptualizes nature—whether as sacred, mechanical, aesthetic, or relational. Understanding perception as culturally and temporally constructed provides a critical lens to reassess dominant views of nature and encourages more reflective, ethical engagements with the environment.

The cultural dimension of nature perception is also an important area of study. Özdemir (2022) highlights the complex nature of Japanese perceptions of nature and how these are shaped by cultural elements. While Japanese culture often assigns aesthetic and philosophical value to nature, Western thought tends to emphasize distinctions between nature and culture. These differences significantly influence how nature is perceived and the human-nature relationship is conceptualized.

Moreover, perceptions of nature in the context of social services are also vital. Kara's study emphasizes that ecological social work promotes living in harmony with nature and includes principles to prevent interspecies discrimination (Kara, 2020). In this context, perceptions of nature are used as tools to increase environmental awareness in social service practices. Such practices strengthen individuals' connections to nature and reinforce environmental justice. Here, the term "social service" refers to a discipline aimed at enhancing the well-being of individuals and communities, ensuring social justice, and developing environmentally harmonious living practices. Social services consider the impact of environmental, social, and economic factors on individuals' quality of life. From this perspective, ecological social work seeks to harmonize human lives with environmental dynamics while prioritizing nature conservation and ecosystem health.

Principles to prevent interspecies discrimination advocate not only for addressing inequalities among humans but also for recognizing equality among all living species. This involves redefining the relationships between humans and nature and considering the rights of other living beings on an equal level. Such an approach expands the responsibility of protecting nature and all life forms from being exclusively human-centric to encompassing all entities as integral parts of the planet. The principles of ecological social work aim to create a sustainable society by promoting societal values that support harmonious coexistence with nature.

The influence of nature perception on individuals is also linked to environmental attitudes and behaviors. Gürer's research indicates that participation in nature activities fosters positive behaviors concerning environmental sustainability (Gürer, 2023). Such participation not only strengthens individuals' relationships with nature but also increases their sensitivity to environmental issues, positively influencing their perceptions of nature.

In summary, perceptions of nature and their historical development are critical for understanding human relationships with nature. These perceptions evolve in interaction with cultural, social, and economic factors. Educational programs, cultural values, and social service practices are among the elements that positively influence nature perceptions. Raising future generations as more environmentally conscious and sustainability-focused individuals is crucial for reshaping perceptions of nature.

The research is structured around the following questions:

- How has the philosophical human-nature relationship evolved throughout history, and what transformations have occurred in this relationship?
- How have philosophical critiques of modernity contributed to the search for alternative paradigms in reconstructing the human-nature relationship?

The modern understanding of nature as an instrument has not only led to environmental destruction but also caused humanity to lose its existential meaning. Thus, a philosophical reconsideration is necessary to establish a more harmonious relationship with nature.

This article examines how the human-nature relationship has evolved from antiquity to modern times and contemporary ecological philosophies. It critically evaluates the historical transformations from viewing nature as a sacred order to its instrumentalization during modernity. It also discusses the potential of contemporary ecological approaches to restore the balance between humans and nature. By evaluating the influence of different historical perspectives on nature on the human-nature relationship, the study explores the opportunities contemporary ecological philosophies offer to redefine this relationship.

2. MATERIAL & METHODOLOGY

This study was designed as a review article that explores the historical and philosophical dimensions of the human-nature relationship. The aim is to examine the evolution of philosophical thought from antiquity to the present day and to critically assess how various paradigms have shaped our understanding of nature. To achieve this, a qualitative research approach was adopted, based on a structured literature review and thematic analysis.

The research process involved a systematic review of both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included the canonical works of key philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Bacon, Kant, and contemporary ecological thinkers like Arne Naess, Vandana Shiva, and

Murray Bookchin. Secondary sources consisted of peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books, and academic theses related to philosophical ecology, environmental ethics, and the human-nature relationship.

The literature search was conducted between March and October 2024 using academic databases including Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR, Google Scholar, DergiPark, and the Turkish National Thesis Center (YÖK Tez Merkezi). Keywords used in the search included "philosophy of nature," "human-nature relationship," "ecological thought," "instrumentalization of nature," "deep ecology," "eco-philosophy," "romanticism and nature," "nature ethics," and "Gaia hypothesis." The selection criteria prioritized conceptual and historical relevance, publication quality, and theoretical contribution. Since it is a theoretical subject, no specific time period was required for the studies examined.

The review process was guided by purposive sampling, in which sources were selected based on thematic relevance and philosophical significance, rather than statistical generalizability. The selected materials were then subjected to thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of key philosophical approaches to nature across different historical periods.

To structure the findings, the paper divides philosophical thought into six thematic-historical periods:

1. Classical Philosophy,
2. Medieval Theology,
3. Non-Western Perspectives,
4. Enlightenment Rationalism,
5. Romanticism and its Critiques,
6. Contemporary Ecological Philosophies.

These categories emerged inductively during the literature review phase, as patterns of thought and shifts in nature perception became apparent. Each thematic section includes a critical evaluation of the dominant philosophical views of the era and their implications for the human-nature relationship.

By combining literature review, thematic classification, and comparative analysis, this methodology provides a robust foundation for rethinking the conceptual roots of ecological crises and for proposing alternative frameworks grounded in philosophical reflection.

3. PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES TO NATURE

The relationship between humans and nature is one of the fundamental topics of philosophical thought. Throughout history, philosophers have addressed the interaction of humans with nature from different perspectives. This intellectual journey, which extends from ancient Greece to the present day, includes various approaches, such as the deification, exaltation, or demonization of nature (Schroeder, 2007; Soga & Gaston, 2020). In the ancient Greek period, thinkers known as natural philosophers were trying to understand nature. During this period, nature was seen as a part of humans, and the desire to live in harmony with it was at the forefront. In particular, Plato and Aristotle considered nature a metaphysical reality. In the Middle Ages, nature was accepted as an order created by God, and it was emphasized that humans should serve nature. During this period, nature was considered a sacred reality (Çilingir, 2018). With the Enlightenment, radical changes occurred in the understanding of nature. Thinkers like Descartes and Bacon viewed nature as a mechanical system and argued that humans could control nature with their minds. This approach led to the instrumentalization of nature and increased humans' dominance over nature. In the 19th and 20th centuries, nature was glorified with a romantic perspective, and modern humans' disconnection from nature was criticized. Philosophers such as

Nietzsche and Heidegger, in particular, emphasized the adverse effects of modern technology on nature (Gürsoy, 2016). Today, with the increase in ecological problems, the human-nature relationship is being discussed again, and movements such as deep ecology are emerging. In this context, it is emphasized that humans should rethink their relationship with nature.

3.1. Classical Period: Plato and Aristotle's Understanding of Nature

Among the philosophers of the classical period, Plato and Aristotle formed the cornerstones of the philosophical tradition with the metaphysical and ontological approaches they developed to nature. Both approaches to nature were shaped as an extension of their systems of thought (Smith, 1983; Brown, 2002; Johansen, 2016). Plato considered nature as a reflection of the World of Ideas. According to him, the physical world is temporary and imperfect; however, this world is a projection of the perfect and unchanging World of Ideas. These understanding positions nature as a bridge between the "visible" and the "invisible" (Fine, 1990; Meynell, 1998). Plato's approach to nature suggests that nature is not a purely physical entity but also has a metaphysical reality. In his work Timaeus, he described the cosmos as a structure organized by a Demiurge (Creator) and functioning in harmony (Cornford, 1997; Schummer, 2001).

Aristotle, on the other hand, approached nature with a teleological approach. According to him, nature contains an order and purpose within itself. One of Aristotle's fundamental works, "Physics and Metaphysics," focuses on the cause-effect relationships of nature and the ultimate purpose of beings. Aristotle explains nature through the theory of four causes: material cause, formal cause, efficient cause, and final cause. In particular, the final cause states that every being in nature serves a purpose. This understanding allows him to see nature not as a static entity but as a continuous process of "becoming" and "changing" (Chappell, 2009; Falcon, 2020; Buckels, 2025).

While Plato took a more metaphysical approach by viewing nature as a reflection of ideas, Aristotle treated nature as a physical and concrete reality. While Plato's approach reflected an idealist perspective, Aristotle developed a realistic understanding of nature based on experience and observation (Close, 1969; Stonehouse et al., 2011; Kahn, 2013; Altuner & Özkan, 2024). Plato's and Aristotle's understanding of nature profoundly influenced the history of Western thought and paved the way for the philosophies of nature that emerged in later periods. While Plato's idealism resonated in the scholastic philosophy of the Middle Ages, Aristotle's scientific approach became one of the cornerstones of the Enlightenment period and modern understanding of science.

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Although Socrates did not leave behind written texts, his philosophical influence—particularly through Plato—profoundly shaped early views on nature and ethics. His emphasis on the examined life and moral responsibility indirectly informs environmental ethics, especially in contemporary debates on ecological virtue and personal accountability (Stonehouse et al., 2011). However, given the scarcity of direct commentary on nature in his dialogues, Socrates' influence is acknowledged primarily through Platonic representations.

3.2. Medieval Thought: The Relationship Between God and Nature

Medieval philosophy was shaped by theological systems such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, and it developed a structure of thought that associated the concept of nature with God. During this period, nature was seen as a reflection of a divine order and was treated as a sacred reality (Lindberg & Numbers, 1986; Luscombe, 1997; Grant, 1999; Osler, 2010). Augustine evaluated nature as a work created by God. According to him, nature is a part of God's perfect plan, and humans have a unique position in this order. In his works Confessions and De Civitate Dei, he emphasizes that nature guides humans in understanding God (Markus, 1990; Nightingale, 2011; Berry, 2017). According to Augustine, nature is not only a physical structure but also has a spiritual meaning. The order and beauty of nature reflect the existence and power of God. This approach brought an understanding that encouraged reading nature as a sacred book.

In medieval thought, nature was seen as an order created by God to serve man. This understanding placed man in the position of being the master of nature. However, this dominance included the idea that nature should not be destroyed but used in accordance with the divine plan. In the Middle Ages, the relationship between God and nature had a deep meaning in terms of metaphysics, theology, and ethics. The thinkers of this period argued that understanding and respecting nature was a means to grasp and approach God's plan. These approaches paved the way for the philosophy of the Renaissance and played a critical role in the evolution of the understanding of nature.

3.3. Non-Western Perspectives on Nature

Islamic philosophy, particularly the works of Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, provides a unique synthesis of reason, spirituality, and nature. Ibn Sina’s teleological view of nature, as outlined in The Book of Healing and The Canon of Medicine, emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings within a divine order. Ibn Sina’s work, particularly The Book of Healing and The Canon of Medicine, integrates Aristotelian thought with Islamic theology. He viewed nature as a manifestation of divine wisdom, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings. His concept of the "Chain of Being" illustrates a hierarchical yet harmonious universe, where every element has a purpose within God’s creation. Like Aristotle, Ibn Sina adopted a teleological view of nature, arguing that every natural phenomenon has a purpose (final cause) ordained by God. This perspective aligns with the idea of nature as a sacred order, contrasting with the mechanistic view of nature that emerged during the Enlightenment (Nasr, 2007). Ibn Sina’s philosophy implies a moral responsibility to preserve nature as a reflection of divine wisdom. This could be compared to contemporary ecological ethics, which emphasize the intrinsic value of nature. Ibn Rushd’s commentaries on Aristotle sought to reconcile reason with religious faith. He argued that nature operates according to rational laws, which humans can understand through observation and intellect.

This aligns with the Enlightenment emphasis on reason but differs in its integration with spiritual values. Ibn Rushd's work suggests that humans are part of a larger cosmic order, challenging anthropocentric views. This resonates with deep ecology's critique of human dominance over nature. Contrast Ibn Rushd's rational yet spiritually grounded view of nature with Descartes' dualism and Bacon's instrumentalism. This comparison could highlight how Islamic philosophy offers a middle path between reverence for nature and rational inquiry (Azid, 2005; Javid, 2007; Calverley & Pollock, 2022).

Many Indigenous philosophies view nature as a living, interconnected web of relationships. For example, the Māori concept of whakapapa emphasizes genealogical connections between humans, animals, plants, and the land. Indigenous practices often emphasize reciprocity with nature. For instance, the Lakota principle of Mitákuye Oyás'iŋ ("all my relations") underscores the interconnectedness of all life and the responsibility to care for the Earth. Indigenous cultures frequently regard natural elements (e.g., rivers, mountains, forests) as sacred. This contrasts sharply with the modern instrumentalization of nature and aligns with the romantic and deep ecology perspectives (Tănăsescu, M. 2020; Reyes-Garcia et al. 2019; Berkes, 2012; Mika, 2012; Pierotti & Wildcat, 2000).

The Quechua concept of Pachamama (Mother Earth) embodies a deep respect for nature and a commitment to living in harmony with it. This could be compared to the Gaia hypothesis, which also personifies the Earth as a living system. The writings of Indigenous scholars like Robin Wall Kimmerer (Braiding Sweetgrass) highlight the integration of ecological knowledge with spiritual values. Kimmerer's emphasis on gratitude and reciprocity could be contrasted with the exploitative attitudes of modernity (Mamani, 2019; Kimmerer, 2013; Lovelock, 1979).

The Buddhist concept of pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination) teaches that all phenomena are interconnected. This aligns with deep ecology's emphasis on the intrinsic value of all life forms. Buddhist ethics advocate for minimizing harm to all living beings, which could be linked to contemporary discussions on sustainable living and animal rights. Taoist philosophy, as articulated in the Tao Te Ching, emphasizes living in harmony with the natural flow of the universe (wu wei). This contrasts with the Enlightenment's emphasis on controlling nature. Taoism's focus on balance and simplicity could be compared to the principles of ecological sustainability and critiques of consumerism (Kumar, 2024; Li 2019; Cummiskey & Hamilton, 2017).

Confucian thought emphasizes moral responsibility and the cultivation of virtue, which could extend to environmental stewardship. The concept of ren (benevolence) could be applied to human-nature relationships. Confucianism's anthropocosmic worldview, which sees humans as part of a larger cosmic order, offers an alternative to anthropocentrism (Lee, 2020; Tu, 2001).

The African philosophy of Ubuntu ("I am because we are") emphasizes communal relationships and interconnectedness. This could be applied to ecological ethics, highlighting the interdependence of humans and nature. Ubuntu's emphasis on community and justice aligns with social ecology's critique of hierarchical structures and its call for equitable relationships with nature. Many African cultures have developed sustainable agricultural and land management practices based on traditional ecological knowledge. For example, the Zulu practice of ukulima (farming) integrates crop rotation and soil conservation techniques (Kyan2023; Nyambi & Otomo, 2020; Chemuru, 2019).

3.4. Enlightenment and Modernity: Rationality and The Instrumentalization of Nature

The Enlightenment period, a revolution in thought centered on human reason and rationality, led to radical changes in understanding nature. During this period, nature ceased to be a sacred order with meaning and purpose; it began to be seen as a resource humans could control through knowledge and technology (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1993).

Enlightenment thought accepted human reason as the most important tool for understanding the universe's functioning and establishing dominance over nature. During this period, nature was defined as a mechanical system that could be comprehended through reason. Newton's laws of physics showed that nature could be understood mathematically and that this order could be used to benefit humans (Roberts, 2004; Gaukroger, 2010; Federici, 2020).

René Descartes, one of the leading philosophers of the Enlightenment, viewed nature as a mechanical structure. Descartes' dualist philosophy positioned the human mind as a separate and superior entity from nature. He states that nature is a "machine" serving humans (Descartes, 1637; Schouls, 1989; Labio, 2004). This approach has formed the philosophical basis for the instrumentalization of nature.

Francis Bacon considered nature as a source for the production of knowledge and the fulfillment of human needs. The principle of "knowledge is power" that Bacon put forward in his work Novum Organum emphasizes the necessity of using nature in accordance with human interests. According to Bacon, the scientific method is the most effective way to control nature (Bacon, 1855; Briggs, 1989; Pesic, 1999; Weeks, 2007).

The idea of Enlightenment formed the basis of the transition to modernity and further reinforced the instrumentalization of nature. With the development of the capitalist mode of production, nature began to be seen as a source of economic growth. Natural resources have been rapidly depleted with the Industrial Revolution and technological advances (Merchant, 1980).

Criticisms directed at modernity emphasize that the instrumentalization of nature has led to ecological destruction and that the relationship between humans and nature has become increasingly problematic. Frankfurt School thinkers such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno criticized the Enlightenment's project of dominating nature. According to them, the instrumentalization of rationality has commodified nature and human relations.

Although the Enlightenment period provided scientific and technological advances that increased humans' dominance over nature, the fact that nature was seen only as a tool has caused ecological and ethical problems. This understanding is considered one of the approaches underlying today's ecological crises.

3.5. Romanticism and Criticism: Modern Man’s Break with Nature

Romanticism emerged as a reaction to the rational understanding of nature of the Enlightenment and modernity; it aimed to bring nature back to the center of human life and repair its broken ties. This movement criticized the modern man's rupture with nature and glorified nature as a spiritual fusion, an aesthetic experience, and a source of inspiration (Oerlemans, 2024; Özen, 2018; Karakurt, 2024).

Instead of seeing nature as a mechanical order or a resource that can be instrumentalized, Romantics approached it as a living structure that exists in integrity and harmony. Nature was described as a mirror reflecting the inner feelings of man and a source that nourishes the human soul (Cunningham & Jardine, 1990; Berlin, 1999; Andersen, 2000).

English poet William Wordsworth saw nature as a space where he could understand the depths of the human soul. In his poem Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, he emphasizes that nature is a shelter where people can regain their spiritual unity and serenity (Wordsworth, 1798). Wordsworth presents nature as a place where people can return to their essence against modern life's mechanical and alienating nature.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that modern civilization has separated people from nature, leading to moral degeneration. He believes human happiness and virtue can only be achieved by returning to nature. In Rousseau's works Emile and The Social Contract, nature represents people's natural state and freedom (Rousseau, 1762).

Romantics argued that modernity has distanced people from nature and pushed them into a spiritual void. The mechanized world created by industrialization, urbanization, and capitalism has disrupted people's meaningful relationship with nature (Merchant, 1980; Garrard, 2004). This situation has caused humans to become alienated not only from nature but also from themselves.

German philosopher and writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe saw nature as an inseparable part of the human experience and opposed its reductionism through scientific reductionism. Goethe's understanding of nature includes empathy and aesthetic sensitivity. According to him, nature can be grasped through human intuitive understanding (Amrine, 1987; Tantillo, 2002; Nassar, 2010).

Romanticism's criticisms of modern humans' separation from nature have been influential in art, literature, environmental ethics, and ecological thought. These criticisms formed the philosophical basis of the environmentalist movements that emerged in the 20th century.

Romanticism offered an alternative to modernity's instrumental understanding of nature and emphasized the importance of a deeper bond between humans and nature. However, the romantic perspective has been criticized in some places for idealizing nature. However, the search for a more meaningful relationship with nature continues to influence efforts to find solutions to modern man's ecological and spiritual problems.

3.6. Contemporary Ecological Philosophies: New Paradigms Between Humanity and Nature

Contemporary ecological philosophies have developed alternative perspectives to modernity's understanding of nature as instrumentalized and dominated. These approaches aim to redefine the relationship between humans and nature and to establish a balance based on ecological sustainability. Many philosophical movements, from ecofeminism to deep ecology, propose rethinking the relationship between humans and nature (Howles et al., 2018; Arif, 2021). There are discussions on five different contemporary ecological philosophies in the literature:

- Deep Ecology: Equality of Humans and Nature: The approach developed by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. This philosophy argues that nature is not just a resource that serves human needs but has value in its own right. Naess rejects anthropocentric approaches and emphasizes that all living things have the right to life. Deep ecology criticizes the approach to environmental problems that are only addressed at a superficial level and proposes a radical paradigm shift (Naess, 1973; Sessions, 1987; Naess, 2011).
- Ecofeminism: The Connection Between Nature and Women: Ecofeminism draws attention to the relationship between environmental destruction and gender inequalities. This approach draws parallels between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. Ecofeminists argue that patriarchal systems instrumentalize nature and women (Merchant, 1980). Vandana Shiva,

one of the pioneering ecofeminists, criticizes how modern science and capitalism exploit nature and women's labor and emphasizes the importance of local knowledge systems (Shiva, 1988; Shiva & Mies, 2014; Puelo, 2017).

- Social Ecology: The Social Roots of Ecological Problems: Social ecology, developed by Murray Bookchin, argues that environmental problems stem from social hierarchies and inequalities. Bookchin states that human exploitation of nature reflects the domination relations between humans (Bookchin, 1993; Clark, 1997; Maton, 2000). Social ecology suggests that more egalitarian and fair social structures should be built for a life in harmony with nature.
- Gaia Hypothesis: The Earth is a Living Being: The Gaia hypothesis, developed by James Lovelock, treats the Earth as a whole, like a living organism. This approach suggests that the Earth is a self-regulating system and that ecosystems work harmoniously (Lovelock, 1979; Kirchner, 1989; Kirchner, 2002). The Gaia hypothesis encourages a lifestyle that respects the environment by reminding us of human dependence on nature.
- Anthropocene and Posthumanism: The Anthropocene refers to a period in which human activities have become the main factor affecting the Earth's geological processes. This concept requires rethinking the ecological effects and responsibilities of humans. On the other hand, posthumanism proposes removing humans from the center of nature and establishing more egalitarian relationships with non-human beings (Braidotti, 2013; Nimmo, 2015; Dovchin et al., 2024).

Although contemporary ecological philosophies have played an important role in the search for solutions to environmental crises, they have also faced criticism. For example, deep ecology has been criticized for ignoring human needs, while ecofeminism has been criticized for establishing a symbolic connection between nature and women. However, these approaches have significantly transformed how humans view nature and developed new paradigms for a sustainable future.

Contemporary ecological philosophies aim to develop a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the relationship between humans and nature. These approaches argue that environmental problems should be addressed not only with technical solutions but also on ethical, social, and philosophical levels.

4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Throughout human history, philosophical approaches to nature have constantly evolved; the understanding of nature as a whole and a sacred order in ancient times has transformed into an approach that instrumentalizes and consumes nature with modernity. However, this transformation has caused harm not only to nature but also to humans themselves. Contemporary ecological crises necessitate deeply questioning the relationship between humans and nature.

The industrialization, urbanization, and modernization processes have distanced humans from nature; nature has begun to be seen as a source of economic growth. This separation has led not only to ecological destruction but also to the disruption of human spiritual and social balances. The destruction of nature means consuming the source of human life; therefore, it is imperative to reconsider the understanding of nature (Merchant, 1980; Shiva, 1988).

It is possible to learn from the various paradigms that philosophical thought offers regarding the relationship between nature and humans. From Plato and Aristotle's understanding of nature based on harmony and harmony to the romantics' call for a return to nature, from contemporary approaches such

as deep ecology and social ecology to the Gaia hypothesis, many ideas emphasize the need to restructure the human-nature relationship. The following elements are important in this restructuring process:

- Redefining Ethics and Values: Adopting the understanding that nature is not just a resource but has a value in its own right.
- Social and Economic Transformation: Addressing ecological problems not only at the individual level but also at the social and systemic level.
- Spiritual and Aesthetic Approach: Recognizing the impact of nature on the human soul and reestablishing this relationship.

Contemporary ecological philosophies show that nature should be approached not only as a technical problem but also in an ethical, aesthetic, and social context. These approaches can guide humans to question their relationship with nature and transform this relationship profoundly. Scientific solutions alone are not enough for ecological sustainability; they must also transform how humans understand and relate to nature.

Rethinking the relationship between humans and nature is necessary to solve ecological crises and for humanity to make sense of its existence. The rich intellectual heritage offered by philosophers from the past to the present is a guide for this transformation. Establishing a more harmonious, respectful, and sustainable relationship between humans and nature can create a new individual and social beginning.

This article contends that the ecological crisis cannot be adequately addressed without a fundamental philosophical transformation in how humanity perceives and relates to nature. While the dominant modern paradigm has reduced nature to a calculable, controllable resource, this study argues for a return to a more integrated, ethical, and relational worldview. The author adopts a critical eco-philosophical stance, drawing on both classical harmony-based understandings and contemporary posthumanist critiques to advocate for the intrinsic value of the more-than-human world. Rather than positioning humans as external observers or masters of nature, this perspective calls for reembedding human identity within the ecological matrix of life. In doing so, it challenges the anthropocentric roots of modern philosophy and calls for a shift toward ecocentric ethics and planetary responsibility. The motivation behind this study is to contribute not only to academic discourse, but also to the intellectual and cultural groundwork for a more sustainable and meaningful coexistence with nature.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction and Research Questions & Purpose

Ideas about nature have never been static. What began as a world understood in terms of order, purpose, and even sanctity gradually became something measurable, manageable, and put to work. The article traces the main philosophical turns that produced this shift and asks how alternatives might help us live differently. Two questions guide the inquiry: how the human–nature relationship has been framed from antiquity to the present, and how critiques of modernity open space for renewed, ecologically attuned paradigms. The aim is to bring together classical and medieval insights, non-Western and Indigenous views, and recent eco-philosophies to outline a normative orientation that resists the instrumental reduction of the more-than-human world.

Methodology

The study is a qualitative, theory-led review carried out between March and October 2024. It reads primary texts—Plato and Aristotle, Augustine, Descartes and Bacon, Rousseau and Goethe, along with Naess, Shiva, Bookchin, and Lovelock—alongside peer-reviewed scholarship found through Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR, Google Scholar, DergiPark, and the Turkish National Thesis Center. Using purposive sampling and thematic analysis, the material is organized into six overlapping strata that emerged inductively during the review: classical philosophy; medieval theology; non-Western and Indigenous approaches; Enlightenment rationalism; Romantic and twentieth-century critiques; and contemporary ecological philosophies. Comparative reading across these strata is used to follow lines of continuity and rupture and to draw out their ethical implications.

Results and Conclusions

The analysis shows how a genealogy of instrumentalization develops: metaphysical and teleological accounts of nature in antiquity and its sacral framing in medieval thought give way to Enlightenment mechanism and the modern alliance of science, technology, and capital. Romantic writers and later critical thinkers diagnose the alienation this produces and re-center aesthetic, moral, and experiential relations with the more-than-human. In parallel, Islamic, Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, African (Ubuntu), and Indigenous traditions articulate relational ontologies that foreground interdependence, reciprocity, and an anthropocosmic sense of belonging. Contemporary movements—deep ecology, ecofeminism, social ecology, Gaia theory, and work around the Anthropocene and posthumanism—add clear normative resources but remain partial when taken in isolation. Synthesizing these strands, the article sketches an eco-philosophical orientation that treats intrinsic value as baseline, grounds ethics in relation and reciprocity, links ecological repair to social justice and institutional change, and keeps open the aesthetic–spiritual dimensions of human encounter with the living world.

Technical solutions alone will not resolve an ecological crisis rooted in habits of thought. Meeting the moment requires a reorientation from anthropocentric control toward ecocentric, relational ethics informed by a plurality of traditions. The framework proposed here invites policy, education, and design to foreground reciprocity and care, and to treat planetary responsibility as a standing obligation rather than an optional add-on. By re-embedding human agency within ecological processes, the study argues, we recover a more adequate account of meaning and responsibility and a more workable basis for sustainable coexistence.

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