

Part I

Modernity, Nature and the Sacred

Chapter One

The Disenchantment of the World

Dover Beach

The sea is calm to-night.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the Straits; – on the French coast, the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the ebb meets the moon-blanch'd sand,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath

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Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Matthew Arnold, 1867

In 'Dover Beach' Arnold gives us a grand and moving metaphor for the decline of religion, for the disenchantment of the world. I quote it here, though, to draw attention to the use of natural imagery within the poem. Like the best metaphors, the key metaphor of the poem illuminates in two directions. Here, the familiar, poignant feel and sound of the retreat of the sea gives flesh to the sense of loss at the fading of faith. But also, the metaphor, like the tide, turns back on itself, helping us to see the retreat of a vital, awesome, natural presence like the sea as a religious event. The sea itself can be seen as a metonym for nature's animacy, withdrawing from the world.

In the poem the sea retreats, leaving behind a world without light or love, a world where nature is denaturalized and inanimate, one whose lingering, faltering animation is only an echo of the disappearing ocean. In the soundscape of the poem the only noise is the retreating roar of the sea, the grating pebbles flung up and tumbling back, borrowing their life temporarily from the tide, then resting in silence. All that's left is the silent, 'naked shingles'. The 'breath of the night-wind' intensifies rather than softens the desolate mood of this 'darkling plain', hostile and meaningless.

This image, I want to suggest, captures well the idea of the desacralization of nature, a narrative that is central to our understanding of the modern world. According to this account, nature has been progressively mechanized and instrumentalized, cleansed of mysterious forces and meanings.¹ Nature is no longer understood as being filled with gods, demons or spirits that might assist, hinder or terrify us. It is no longer shot through with occult connections between one object and another. Neither is it any longer one of the two books of God, filled, like scripture, with signs and lessons for human beings from its creator. As a disenchanting realm, practices towards it that might once have felt appropriate – worship, prayer, magic, interpretation – now seem quaint and futile, to flail around without purchase.

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Instead, nature in the modern age seems to present itself to us in very different ways. Nature is mathematical – something to be counted, measured and mapped. Nature is immanent – it operates according to its own internal processes, rather than being shaped or guided by a supernatural hand. It is mechanical, behaving according to cause and effect, not seeking teleological goals. It is a resource, to be owned or held in common, to be used or preserved. It gives up its meanings to careful observation and scientific theory, not to mythology or divination. This is the nature of scientific, industrial modernity, the nature whose being is mastered by science, whose value is measured by economics, and whose potentiality is determined by technology.

Indeed, technology can be seen as a key player in this drama. The rise of modern technology is not just a side effect of nature's desecralization – as if the banishing of nature's spirits merely granted permission for the expansion into nature of technological operations that had been held in check by the threat of supernatural reprisal. Rather, technology *is* the desecralization of nature; it is in technology that nature's disenchantment is most clearly performed. The technological mastery of nature, the turning of nature's potentiality to human purposes, is not just the putting into action of a technological attitude; it in turn validates that attitude, making it seem right and inevitable. And it is only when we approach nature in a technological way – in a way that is concerned above all with prediction and control – that the kinds of knowledge offered by science and economics become intelligible and useful (Habermas, 1971a).

According to this story of the world's disenchantment, then, as technology's powers advance, those of nature withdraw. For some – let us call them the modernists – this is a story to be celebrated. Max Weber, who first gave us the term *die Entzauberung der Welt* (Weber, 1989: 14, 30), used the phrase to describe the way that, in modern societies, sublime, ultimate values withdraw from public life into the private sphere, leaving public life to be organized around notions of instrumental rationality and bureaucratic efficiency (Weber, 1989: 30). The disenchantment of nature is central to Weber's account: in a disenchanted society 'there are in principle no mysterious, incalculable powers at work' – everything is capable of being explained (Weber, 1989: 13). According to the modernists both nature and social relations have been stripped bare, are rendered how they have always been, no longer hidden from view by the confusions of religion and ignorance. Weber, as we shall see later, is interestingly ambivalent about this story. But in the hands of other modernists such as Jürgen Habermas this story becomes more unambiguously a positive narrative of the success of Enlightenment values. Influenced by Hegel's vision of (particularly Western) history as the progressive incarnation of reason or 'Spirit' in human affairs (Hegel, 1977), Habermas narrates the disenchantment of

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the world as humanity's liberation from superstition and ignorance, from enthrallment to nature and to arbitrary power (Habermas, 1984).²

Yet this very same story has also been told by the critics of modernity, this time in a more negative mode, as a kind of fall into darkness. In the nineteenth century we heard this critical version of the disenchantment thesis from the Romantics in Europe and from the Transcendentalists of North America. In the twentieth century the theorists of the Frankfurt School such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1972) offered their own version of this counter-narration, building on Weber's own account of how the growth of modern technical rationality increasingly might leave us not free but caught in an 'iron cage' of bureaucratic reason. And then, in the second half of the twentieth century, various popular social and cultural movements popularized this negative reading of disenchantment; these movements included the hippy counter-culture, the natural health movement, and, perhaps above all, the environmental movement.

For many environmental writers, our alienation from nature lies at the roots of our rootlessness, at the base of our base treatment of nature. Morris Berman, for example, gives a particularly passionate version of this view – that the ecological crisis is one that ultimately is a result of alienation from nature. Once, Berman recounts, humans were participants, at home in a living universe. But the scientific revolution changed everything, destroying the possibility of ultimate meaning and cosmic belonging. For the alienated modern consciousness the human being is largely an observer, not a part of the world. The technological attitude opens up a breach between subject and object, in a process nicely captured by Timothy Reiss in the image of Galileo's telescope as described in his *Sidereus Nuncius* of 1610: the telescope constructed the distance between the human subject and the material world at the same moment that it promised to bridge it (Reiss, 1982: 24–5). For Berman,

[t]he logical end point of this world view is a feeling of total reification: everything is an object, alien, not-me; and I am ultimately an object too, an alienated 'thing' in a world of other, equally meaningless things. This world is not of my making; the cosmos cares nothing for me, and I do not really feel a sense of belonging to it. What I feel, in fact, is a sickness in the soul. (Berman, 1981: 3)

What is striking here is that both sides – both the champions and the critics of modernity – accept more or less the same story. Both those who see modern rationality and technology as liberating forces, and those who see them as a source of profound alienation, generally accept that nature has become disenchanted, and that the rise of modern technology has been

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centrally implicated in that disenchantment, as principal beneficiary. But, to paraphrase Mark Twain, what if reports of the death of nature have been greatly exaggerated? What if the narrative of the disenchantment of nature is little more than a creation myth of modern society – a half-truth told in order to secure a sense of modernity's exceptionality, its discontinuity with earlier cultures (Crook, 1991; Latour, 1993)? What if the critics of modernity have sold the pass by even admitting that nature has been stripped of sacrality, and that the modern technological mastery of nature is a wholly secular enterprise?

For on closer examination the narrative of disenchantment reveals a more complex story, one where disenchantment – the rendering of the world as totally profane and without spiritual significance – itself involves and calls forth new forms of enchantment. Consider a few examples. A young protester locks himself to the top of a swaying tree in order to prevent the construction of a new road and the consequent destruction of an area of native woodland. A middle-aged woman sees an acupuncturist in order to unblock the natural 'healing powers' of the human body. A farmer walks out into his fields with a canister of herbicide, determined to eradicate the weeds that are 'invading' his crops. A woman, still smarting after an argument with her partner, stops her car at the roadside on a deserted mountainside to take in the view, and feels able to get things back in proportion. A botanist collates all the data from his experiments, and tries to discover the law that underlies the different patterns of growth he observes in his plants. How does nature appear in these examples – as the 'dead matter' of a mechanized world-view (Merchant, 1980)? Or is it sometimes an object of absolute, intrinsic value, a healing energy, an evil to be subdued, a calming presence, or an obeyer of laws? And, if so, what does this say about ideas of nature's disenchantment (See Milton, 1999, 2002)?

In the rest of this book I will be arguing that contemporary ideas and practices concerning nature and technology remain closely bound up with religious ways of thinking and acting. More specifically, in the next chapter I will argue that these ideas and practices are radically conditioned by the very specific religious history undergone by Western society, by what I want to call the 'long arc' of institutional monotheism. Other, very different, stories could be told about ideas of nature and technology that have developed in cultures outside the West. But because of the central importance of European cultures and their New World offshoots in the emergence of modern society, it is the trajectory of the sacred in these cultures that will be the focus of this book. This trajectory has seen the establishment, rise and fall of a vertical, transcendent axis in thought and cosmology – one that both united and divided the empirical world from a transcendent, other-worldly reality. As this axis emerged, the supernatural powers of

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ancient divinities were progressively gathered together in the monotheistic God of the Abrahamic faiths of the Near East, and expelled from the empirical world into a supernal reality. This axis, along with its correlate in the philosophical reason of classical Greece, established a new dimension in human experience which had a profound impact on ways of thinking about the world, an impact that was felt across Europe with the adoption of Christianity by Rome. Without such an axis it would just not have become possible, as happened later, to regard nature as *nature* – as a secular realm, ordered according to its own immanent principles, principles that can be discovered through inquiry. Indeed, without this axis it would not have been possible to think of nature as one unified thing at all. It is as if the transcendent axis gave human thought a new vantage point to regard the cosmos, as though from the top of a tower built into the sky.

Contemporary understandings of nature and technology, both secular and sacred, I am suggesting, are impossible to understand without reference to what sociologists call their ‘path-dependency’ – in this case, to their conditioning by this very specific religious history, and in particular by its central motif, the transcendent axis. Even the very plurality of modern ideas of nature, as illustrated in the vignettes above, is evidence not just that the age of transcendental monotheism has passed, but that we have passed *through* it. For, while this vertical axis no longer casts its shadow across the West, its fragments still litter the cultural landscape. Indeed, the very secularity and immanence of the modern world – the seeming absence of a transcendent dimension, of any reference to an other-worldly reality – came about not through the dismantling of the transcendent axis but through its radicalization. The axis was stretched to infinity, as, after the Reformation, the divine realm came to be understood as even more radically beyond this world, as an absolute and unconditioned divine, to be worshipped for its own sake, without thought of benefit to the worshipper. But then, with the modern age, the corollary of this – the absolute profaneness of the empirical world, its self-sufficiency and immanence – became the central cultural motif. A transcendent God was no longer seen as a necessary being, without which the existence and order of the world was inconceivable. Yet the vertical dimension, which had helped constitute the idea of a secular empirical reality in the first place, was not so much cut loose and discarded as collapsed *into* that reality, as attributes of the divine were reassigned to nature and to the human subject, and intelligibility and value came to be seen not as conferred by creation’s relationship with a transcendent God, but as inherent in the confrontation of human consciousness by the empirical world itself.

But, as with all transformations of the sacred in religious history, the emergence of the contemporary sacred did not completely displace earlier understandings of nature and the sacred. Within the contemporary ‘abso-

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lute profane' – the experience of empirical reality as without a transcendent source or ground of meaning – there also coexists a variety of sacralizations of nature; indeed this plurality is *constitutive* of the contemporary ordering of the sacred. This condition is what I want to call the 'postmodern sacred', one in which plural perceptions of meaning and value coexist. But it is also post-transcendental – not just in the sense of being subsequent to, but also a consequence of, the period of transcendental religion. For it is only at *this* end of the transcendental arc – after the age of transcendental monotheism – that the postmodern sacred can exist.

So it is not the case that the retreat of institutionalized monotheism in Western societies has simply allowed the return of the kind of understandings of nature that dominated in pre-Christian cultures. There is certainly a sense that Arnold's retreating tide of monotheism has deposited us once again on a polytheistic shoreline. Yet, although contemporary societies seem to be enjoying a revival of 'nature religion', forms of religiosity that make nature their central object of concern and sacralization (Pearson et al., 1998), it would be a mistake to see this too literally as a 'return of the repressed', as an eruption of a long-suppressed pagan cosmology and sensibility. Instead, we should understand contemporary ideas of and practices around nature as evidence of a postmodern sacred, a mode of being-in-the-world and a cosmology that is the product of a long and distinctive historical process, and shaped by distinctively contemporary conditions. The long tide of transcendental monotheism has so radically shaped Western culture that its departure leaves us in a very different landscape than the one from which we started.