

Darwin's Incomplete Idea

Wittgenstein, language, our place in nature
and our responsibility for the environment

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Chapter 10

Political biology

“The condition of the earth is critical.” This is what you hear from ecologists and environmentalists all over the world (here from the biologist Staffan Ulfstrand).

It is therefore of the utmost importance to change direction. This requires, according to Ulfstrand, a cultural revolution that will bring “new norms, new attitudes, new ways of living and new goals for humanity – a future quite different from our past”.

In view of past mistakes, it sounds like a wise recommendation. Change is not only necessary. It is urgent. Many areas of life are threatened. According to Ulfstrand and many other biologists, there is a huge obstacle, however: “Human nature is a mixture of good and evil. It has been that way since the beginning of time and will remain the same. We cannot do anything about it.” In other words: we can only be partly successful. Nature rules.

It is very fortunate that this is political biology. If it were not, we would never overcome the crisis that becomes more threatening every day. The evil part of our nature would then always be there to obstruct and destroy our good intentions and make the future a sordid copy of the past. There are of course evil acts in history. No one can deny that. But they cannot be explained by referring to a “human nature”, because no one has shown, in a scientific manner that such a nature exists. Many biologists take it for granted, as Ulfstrand does. But taking something for granted is not science. As long as biologists have not demonstrated the nuts and bolts of human nature, there is no weight to arguments based on it.

Ideas like Ulfstrand’s are counterproductive. On the one hand he contends that “we are masters of our destiny” and on the other “we have to put up with ourselves the way we are”. How can we map out our destiny if something else – “the way we are” – is standing in our way, directing our thoughts and actions? These contradicting ideas make biologists pirouette on the spot like well-trained circus-horses. Nothing positive will come out of such ideas.

Scientists know that the idea of a human nature is a feeble one and have therefore tried to bolster it. Donald E Brown, an American anthropologist with ties to the University of California has made a monumental effort to solve the problem once and for all.

He has compiled an extensive list of *Human Universals* (the title of his book). But even from the outset this book is, in my opinion, a complete failure. To be able to put anything at all on the list we have to survey *all of history* and *all cultures*. Such an immense undertaking lies beyond our means. And even if we should manage, this godlike knowledge would tell us nothing about our nature, because history is not finished and cannot be summed up.

One of the items on the list is “belief in supernatural/religion”. Such beliefs have indeed accompanied humankind throughout history. But that is no guarantee of universality. The same thing can be said about “beliefs about fortune and misfortune”. Even though such beliefs are widespread, especially in the American and Western societies, there is nothing universal about them. They are part of a culture and not of an eternal destiny.

“Childhood fear of strangers” is another debatable item on the list as is “conflict”, “copulation normally conducted in privacy”, “contempt”, “discrepancies between speech, thought, and action” (there is at least one person who displayed no such discrepancies and thus claimed he was the truth), “division of labour by sex”, “economic inequalities”, “envy”, (there are probably many human beings who in this respect lack a human nature), “facial expression of disgust”, “females do more direct child-care”, “gossip”, “in-group distinguished from out-group”, “insulting”, “judging others”, “language employed to misinform or mislead”, “language, prestige from proficient use of”, “magic”, “males more aggressive”, “male and female seen as having different natures”, “males dominate public realm”, “manipulate social relations”, “prestige inequalities”, “property”, “rape”, (how on earth do you prove that rape is a part of human nature? Because it is frequent in many *societies*?) “sexual jealousy”, “sexual modesty”, “special speech for special occasions”, “statuses”, “tabooed foods”, “territoriality”, “weapons”, “dominance/submission”, (suggests that there will never be, or have been, the possibility of equality in any society), “fear of death”, “husband older than wife on average”, “males travel greater distances over life-time”, “pride”, “manipulation of self-image”, “shame”, “thumb sucking”, “violence”.

It seems to me that professor Brown in order to compile his list has been looking out of the window at his university to catalogue the American way of life. And what else can a person do if he wants to describe human nature? If there is a human nature, which I doubt, it should be possible to enlist human Universals, behaviour that keeps recurring. But there is nothing of the sort in sight. Brown's list is just a catalogue of what human beings *seem* to be, or what has been manifested as human practice in certain societies. As we will see later on the identity of humankind, of the self, is much more complex than listings in a catalogue.

Science cannot start from a blank slate, nor can religion. If you ask yourself "what is a human being?" it seems that you start at zero. But you do not. "What" is already leading the way. The question is pregnant with the answer just like the question "Is there a God?"

Darwin's answers are no exceptions. Like all scientists before and after him he was enmeshed in a scientific tradition, asking questions in a scientific way. When he seemed to have perfected his theory of evolution, the question remained: how does humankind fit into the scheme? The answer could not deviate from what he had already discovered or the theory would be jeopardized. So Darwin made a great effort to define humankind's place in nature in *The Descent of Man*. The ground was prepared in the *Origin of Species*, where he says that "light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history". "Man must be included with other organic beings in any general conclusion respecting his manner of appearance on earth." In the introduction to *The Descent of Man*, where Darwin also outlined the goal of the book, he wrote: "The sole object of this work is to consider, firstly, whether man, like every other species, is descended from some pre-existing form; secondly, the manner of his development; and thirdly, the value of the differences between the so-called races of man."

What Darwin has to do in order to reach his threefold goal is to show the similarities between human beings and other animals. When it comes to mental faculties, no one can deny that there is a great gap between humankind and the higher animals. Even Darwin acknowledged that. But the difference is just one of quality. "My object . . . is to show that there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties", he says and goes on with a very strange and illogical conclusion: "as man possesses the same senses as the lower animals, his fundamental intuitions must be the same". The idea is that if you have all

senses in common you must behave in a similar way. He seems not quite sure of what he just said and takes a step back in the next sentences. “But man, perhaps, has somewhat fewer instincts than those possessed by the animals which come next to him in the series.” He reinforces the idea of similarities by saying that “most of the complex emotions are common to the higher animals and ourselves” and goes on to prove it.

Just like humans, animals show wonder, curiosity, imitation, attention, memory, love, temper, imagination, reason, self-consciousness, ability to abstract, language, a sense of beauty and other such capacities. The list is substantial and overwhelming.

Dogs show what may be fairly called a sense of humour, as distinct from mere play; if a bit of stick or other such object be thrown to one, he will often carry it away for a short distance; and then squatting down with it on the ground close before him, will wait until his master comes quite close to take it away. The dog will then seize it and rush away in triumph, repeating the same manoeuvre, and evidently enjoying the practical joke.

This is an exact description of what dogs did during the 19th century and *still do*. For thousands of years dogs have had an unchangeable “sense of humour”. I think Darwin is using the wrong word here. If dogs had humour they would surely not repeat themselves.

It has been said that Darwin loved animals and revered the fantastic development that he managed to describe in *The Origin of Species*. In my opinion, there is very little of this reverence in his later book. In his urgent quest to prove his theories he does not seem to respect the integrity of animals. He adorns them with all kinds of human emotions and capacities like that of humour. The approach smacks of anthropomorphism.

This strategy is repeated by Darwin’s followers. The similarities between us and other living creatures must be accounted for, or they would not be our ancestors. In Sweden a modern replica of *The Descent of Man* is *The Heritage of Virtue*, written by psychiatry professor Nils Uddenberg. He does what many Darwinists do. To convince us of our heritage he stretches both ends making humans more ape-like and apes more human-like.

What is the first thing that you must remove from humankind if you want to compare us to apes? Unpredictability. We are very often

unpredictable in our actions and even to ourselves. Many biologists and ecologists realize that this is a crucial point. Apes have to be made more unpredictable and human beings less if the equation is to even up.

We are all conscious of the unpredictable side of others and ourselves. Nothing has to be the way it seems to be. The greatest feeling of all, the love of another human being, is expressed in uncountable ways. Love does not even have to surface, but be unknown to everybody, shining like an inner light making the world meaningful. The characteristics do not have to be those of novels or films. It seems that there is always something left to describe, an opening for new expressions. The same is true of other emotions. If somebody hates me it does not mean I have to react in a similar way. I might turn the other cheek or just shrug my shoulders. There are innumerable examples of similar behaviour.

Emotions do not even have to be emotions, but can easily be mimicked.

How does Uddenberg handle the issue? He predominantly describes human feelings and reactions as biologically determined. "Take a couple of friends who have cooperated in a business or at a science department. When one of them is letting the other down the fury of the deceived person cannot be stopped." Is this really what *always* will happen?

On the contrary, the person in this example can react in numerous ways, with rage, with surprise, wonder, sorrow, indulgence, forgiveness and even compassion. All depends on the interpretation of the act. The deception does not even have to be deception.

When I lived in Canada in the 70s, my wife worked together with a person who seemed nice and trustworthy. Both were psychologists with the aim to develop an instrument that could measure retarded students' adaptation to industrial work. Of the two my wife obviously came up with the most important ideas and the work progressed. But when the report was handed to the management there was only one name on it: that of her partner. She asked him about it. Was there an oversight? Had he forgotten to put her name on the report? His explanation was utterly astonishing to both of us. You must use your elbows to get anywhere, he admonished her. And the sharper they are the better. He even blamed her: She should have gone to the management before he did to show them how clever she was. Biologists like Uddenberg would never have guessed our reaction. We felt sorry for the man, for his upbringing, for the society he lived in, for his

egotism and his future life. In our view he was not a guiding-star of future psychologists but a person in need of help.

Human reactions are like this, difficult to predict. But biologists wholeheartedly trust in biology. "Human beings have like other animals a biologic tendency to react with anger in certain circumstances." (NU). "The theory of evolution can explain what situations cause anger." (NU). What circumstances and situations? Biologists are often reluctant to tell us and when they try examples become ridiculous. "He hit me so I hit him back" (NU).

Ideas like this may well contribute to the high level of violence in our societies and to apologetic behaviour. "I did nothing wrong. I just acted according to my nature."

Leaning on these observations Uddenberg argues that we did not invent the exchange of favours even if reciprocity is very common in our relations. It is therefore in our nature to feel "a duty to return what others have given us by paying them back with the same value". The ape-inherited reciprocity initiates dependency in exchange of values. "The person who has been treated with benevolence feels like a debtor and regards the benefactor as a creditor."

This is also, he argues, the foundation of the golden rule. There is a debt behind it. According to the Bible, "we are told to be benevolent to all people no matter if they have been so to us or not. But behind the benevolence there is an expectation of the favour returned."

In my opinion the golden rule is thwarted by this addition referring to evolutionary roots. The altruism imbedded in the golden rule becomes selfishness. We expect something back. I wonder if the biologist version of the golden rule has anything to do with it. Is it really based on reciprocity? I do not think so. On the contrary, I think reciprocity will ruin it. The golden rule exists because we love our fellow men, not because we love ourselves.

When the golden rule is applied, there is an absence of reciprocity. Primo Levi tells of one instant in *Is this a human being?* And Alexander Solzhenitsyn has examples from Gulag. If you are a strict Darwinist you might expect that individuals who are always hungry, frozen and exhausted would take every opportunity to grab food from others using all kinds of trickery and deceit. There are of course such acts. But there are also examples of the opposite, where people have shared their rations even though they jeopardize their own lives in doing so. They obviously do

not expect anything in return as the recipient lacks the means. You might argue that there still might be some selfishness involved: the satisfaction of being good. But does this really apply to persons depicted by Levi and Solzhenitsyn?

Unpredictability is abundant in human relations. But to biologists this fact is of minor concern. They are convinced that we have a nature that translates into actions.

When evolutionary biologists place humankind on a level with animals, they do this because the same biological laws that gave other living organisms their characteristics also have shaped our own. By studying the forms of life close to us we can apprehend why we have become what we are. (NU)

Many philosophers object to this simplified way of grouping human beings with “other living organisms”. One of them is Jean Paul Sartre, whose view on the formation of human beings is quite different from that of Uddenberg and many biologists.

Sartre disengages us from nature. Biologists and ecologists do the opposite. In order to link us closely to nature they try to find the similarities between man and beast. But what is human nature? There is no reliable account to be found anywhere to make the comparison possible. If science does not have the answer, literature surely must. It has been around for thousands of years. This is also where Uddenberg finds support, just like Dennett did. And he does so in a book from the 16th century by Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*.

He is helped along by science in his pursuit. Primatologists like Frans de Waal point to a “Machiavellian intelligence” among the larger apes. It seems as if their observations prove the closeness of our relationship. But I think the primatologists forget something, just like Dennett did with his idea of an archetypal poem. *The Prince* by Machiavelli is *literature* and as such a very subjective account of human life. It has nothing to do with humankind as such but offers advice to princes who want to gain power or maintain their position. It should be obvious that princes can no more represent humankind than can cannibals or paedophiles.

What characterizes Machiavellian intelligence that show the link between us and the larger apes? Both species intrigue, fawn, build hierarchies, humiliate each other, bestow favours on close kin, are familiar

with the idea of reciprocity and much else. The conclusion is obvious: "Politics is older than humankind . . . Friendship and the greed for power, revenge and reconciliation are phenomena with roots far beyond the human sphere." (NU).

The Machiavellian chapter ends with even more general claims:

All human culture is partly determined by our evolutionary history. Our consciousness as well as our empathy can be understood according to the conditions of one who lives in a group of cunning apes. When the advice Machiavelli gives his prince reminds you of the tricks that are used in the struggle for power among the apes at Arnhem Zoo it is more than a laughing matter. The princes of Machiavelli behaved as they did because they were descended from the same social being that also was the ancestor of the big apes. (NU).

According to biologists it is obvious that we are kept on a leash by nature, even though the length varies. To some biologists it is extensive as is the free will, to others rather short.

On the one hand we have a human nature that influences our actions. On the other hand we can surmount the call of nature and act as if oblivious of it. But only to a certain extent, because "we were born selfish" as Richard Dawkins puts it in *The Selfish Gene*.

Uddenberg pursues the same line of thought. We can adjust the leash but only to a certain extent. He even fears that the leash is more coherent with the dark side of human behaviour than with our positive qualities. "The ambition to revenge – the desire to punish the violator of the contract – is an inevitable complement of reciprocity." As I have tried to show – very little is inevitable when it comes to human behaviour. But biologists who are eagerly trying to link us to nature, turn a deaf ear to such objections. Instead they often tighten the leash with an array of statements: "Violence is part of our nature". "Aggressiveness can be regarded as a biologically founded behaviour." "The desire to revenge is a fundamental human inclination." "To retaliate upon an injustice seems to be one of our most fundamental impulses, as irresistible as hunger or sexual lust." (NU). Does this strange repetition, dwelling exclusively on actions spurned by hatred, revenge and aggression, really point to

fundamental qualities of humankind? It seems more like the talk of a disillusioned and bitter person.

Uddenberg even lets xenophobia be a product of evolution telling us “the tendency to make a difference between ‘we’ and ‘them’ is deeply rooted in human nature.”

Reading this I cannot help shivering with disgust. This is pure political biology, subjective ideas masquerading as scientific facts in order to strengthen inequality.

Trying to prove his point Uddenberg resorts to the same idea that I paid attention to in the opening of this chapter, the existence of human universals. “There is a core of human behaviour and notions that are repeated from society to society and this core is probably handed down by evolution.” The idea is repeated in the text like a mantra. “The emotions of human beings have a given form: love and loyalty is like jealousy and revenge universal human passions.” “All these universals indicate a human nature.”

Beyond human diversity there are human universals: patterns that are repeated from place to place and in different ages. We recognize ourselves in the texts of Homer, in Chinese love poetry from the 14th century or in the alliterated verses of the Edda poetry. We are not only cultural beings – we also have a nature.

Is he really talking about genuine universals? Or might there not be other explanations to the historical uniformity, for example that societies where these passions appear fundamentally resemble each other: they all thrive on inequality. In my opinion a truly scientific author would have written: “There *seem to be* certain universals.”

In a later book, *Ideas of Life*, Uddenberg clings to the same notion of universals and the importance of biology. “The person who wants to understand why certain types of societies have a tendency to repeat themselves must study the fundamentals of evolutionary biology.”

There is little hope for humankind in this. We seem to be stuck in a treadmill of endless repetition. In the face of such a grim destiny it is consoling to know that the idea of universals in history and in human beings is a backbone of political conservatism.

It is designed to resist social change and preserve privileges and injustice.

The notion of a “human nature” is coupled to the idea that we are products of evolution. Uddenberg and other biologists only repeat what Darwin said in 1859. And they do it not because of the truth of the matter, but as members of a Darwinian tradition.

A “human nature” has been given to us by evolution, Darwin says. If so, consequences will follow. What about the roles in society? The differences between sexes? Are they too determined, at least partly, by nature? Darwin’s answer is in the affirmative. In order to prove his point he drags a whole zoo into the discussion. “No one disputes that the bull differs in disposition from the cow, the wild-boar from the sow, the stallion from the mare . . . and the males of the larger apes from the females.” Darwin is convinced that men and women are different because the sexes of animals are. Women are thus by nature more caring and less selfish than are men, which make women resemble savages. Men, on the other hand, are rivals to a greater extent. They like competition, have a higher degree of ambition, which makes them more selfish than women (and less related to savages). They lack the intuition, tenderness and rapid perception of women, who also are better imitators, qualities that are “characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilisation.”

When Darwin tries to demonstrate the “bull-and-cow” theory in humankind he does so by listing the achievements of men and women in society.

The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shown by man’s attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman – whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands. If two lists were made of the most eminent men and women in poetry, painting, sculpture, music . . . history, science, and philosophy, with half-a-dozen names under each subject, the two lists would not bear comparison. We may also infer . . . that if men are capable of a decided pre-eminence over women in many subjects, the average of mental power in man must be above that of woman.

I wonder what Darwin would have said about the intellectual capacity of boys and girls in Swedish schools, where the girls vastly outperform the boys – even immigrant girls outperform native Swedish boys. It should be obvious to everybody that Darwin's comparison is nothing but unjust, clumsy and ill-concocted. One could say that Darwin falls into a trap. He starts off with the notion that differences are natural and that they therefore are expressed in social life. He thereby omits all the real causes of these differences: tradition, opportunities, patriarchy, child-bearing, home-making, schooling, professions, social order etc.

He simply does not see that his conclusions are biased, that he disguises what is really the cause of inequality and differences under a veil of putative science.

Like somnambulists biologists walk in the footsteps of their master:

“The social roles of men and women are partly an expression of their biologically determined nature.” (NU). One wonders about the “partly” bit. What part is that?

In accordance with this, certain male characteristics are unavoidable. Uddenberg tells us the story of an executive at a Swedish export company in the US who had demanded ‘sexual favours’ of a female employee. “Without excusing this executive one must establish the fact that he behaved just as you expect a successful primate male to behave.”

There seems to be some kind of predetermined pattern of behaviour in “successful primate males”. How do less successful or even unsuccessful primate males behave? Do they not have the same nature, or are “successful males” some kind of new species?

“Men have . . . a biologically founded will to make social careers.” It is convenient to resort to biology to preserve privileges: it makes it an act of nature that around 90 per cent of Swedish university professors are men. Then no one will look for the real causes.

“The background of the traditional distribution of power between the sexes is found in our biological history.” This is really good news (to men). Evolution is on our side!

Biology even dictates wage policy. I wonder if the negotiators have discovered this powerful ally? “The unequal distribution of power and income in society is a modern reflection of the social reality of the ape-flock.” (NU). We are told that there is a biological reason for the differences between male and female salaries! Uddenberg realizes that he

might be walking on thin ice and modifies his statement: “Even if a plausible evolutionary explanation is possible as to why men very often have higher salaries than women – and such an explanation is possible – it is not the same as saying that this is how it *should* be.”

In *The Heritage of Virtue*, just as in *The Descent of Man*, we encounter prejudice against men and women, disguised as science. Beneath the scientific veneer something is moving like a beast shunning the light of day: a conservative, bourgeois consciousness.

The same political consciousness holds humankind to be partly incorrigible and blames that on the evolution. Darwin himself does so to a certain extent. Edberg, Dennett and other ecologists that I have studied agree with him, even if they also stress our adaptability.

Richard Dawkins emphasizes that humankind to a certain extent is incorrigible. In *The Selfish Gene* he issues a warning: do not believe too firmly in social change.

Be warned that if you wish, as I do, to build a society in which individuals cooperate generously and unselfishly towards a common good, you can expect little help from biological nature. Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish. Let us understand what our own selfish genes are up to, because we may then at least have the chance to upset their designs, something that no other species has ever aspired to.

This seems to me to be another example of the split human being demonstrated by ecologists and to a certain extent by Darwin himself. Generosity and altruism have to be taught, harnessing a deeply rooted natural selfishness that will reappear with every new generation. It is like imagining a fly steering a 16,000 horsepower oil tanker.

To make his theories seem plausible Dawkins emphasizes that even babies are selfish. And they must be, if the selfish-gene theory is correct. Generosity is secondary.

“Selfish greed seems to characterise much of child behaviour”, Dawkins says. Is greed really the proper word here? Is a baby sucking the milk of its mother greedy?

Another question also has to be answered. Why is it possible for us to teach generosity and altruism, if we were born selfish? How and where does that urge originate?

The core of Darwinism is that *all* human beings have a nature. And if so, *all* human beings have to fight that nature in the way Dawkins describes. But all of us do not. There are persons, even in our competitive, individualistic society that do not fight this nature at all. To them it is not even an effort to be unselfish and generous. Where is their human nature?

The subject in Dawkins' notorious book is not a human being. It is the gene. We are only vehicles built to transport genes from one generation to another, Dawkins argues. I have previously tried to show that super-subjects like God or Nature exist because we are forced to behave like secondary subjects in all unequal societies. We have to install super-subjects in our view of the world to make it seem rational. The idea of a God or Nature that have created or produced humankind is therefore a political statement, not a biological or religious one.

The same thing can be said of the gene. It is a supreme subject ousting the only subject there is, the human being. The reasons are social. Dawkins is political when he thinks he is scientific. We should remind ourselves of the words of Karl Marx, when subjects like Nature, God or The Gene usurp our birthrights: "The highest being of man is man himself."

In *The Heritage of Virtue* one chapter is titled "Utopias and The Incurable Human Being". The theory that "the evil of mankind is caused by an evil society" annoys the author. To prove its falsity he points to the catastrophic and tragic attempts to create ideal societies. Their failures are due to biology. Human nature is difficult to change.

He criticizes Emile Durkheim and Margaret Mead for their socially based theories. It is utterly wrong he says that "culture only can be understood from culture" (Durkheim) and that "the personality types of the two sexes are social products". (Mead).

Modern science, especially biology, has made such theories obsolete. Psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and other scientists are abandoning Durkheim and Mead in favour of biology, the only science that reveals "the essence of humankind".

Even if social change is rapid, the characteristics of humankind were shaped by conditions prevalent during the hunter and gatherer era and cannot be transformed at will.

We cannot erase all our undesired qualities with pedagogy and good intentions but have to live with our biologically determined imperfections. The failure of Utopians ought to teach us one thing, Uddenberg emphasizes: we are not a wax in our own hands. "Humankind cannot create itself at will, there are certain biological patterns that we cannot disregard."

Could there not be another reason why Utopians fail? I would argue that they fail because they regard what is present, our contemporary time, as insufficient. Utopians locate the "ideal state" in the future, just as religious people locate paradise in a life after death. This is the fundamental mistake, because our present existence supplies us with all the means to solve all problems. We just have to understand how language predetermination works. We need not look for answers in the future or search for them in heaven (or in the evolution). *Our true identity is always with us* though not discernible in a solely scientific way. Utopia is escapism as well as dystopia. And that so many take refuge in one or the other is utterly tragic. Utopians are like starving men who turn away from a rich table to search for it in the sky.

Ignorance of language function is behind the failure of Utopians. If you try to change society without changing the language you will never succeed. The old society will hibernate inside the new one and wait for a ray of stimulation to show its hidden claws.

Evolutionists, biologists and religious people, believing that they were created or produced, do not seem to understand the importance of the subject, of their own lives. For that reason their attempts, if there are any, to show humanity the way out of a threatening ecological breakdown is counterproductive. They bolt the door in trying to open it.

A future breakdown of our means to breathe, feed and live will not be caused by the constancy of our nature or our lack of knowledge. It has nothing to do with hubris, selfishness, insufficient love of our neighbours, or any so called human deficiency. It solely rests on our inability or unwillingness to acknowledge that our "ecological system" is different from that of all other species and all other natural systems. Language/consciousness is our true breeding ground, our natural system that will reconcile us with nature.

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