

Dirassat & Abhath
The Arabic Journal of Human
and Social Sciences



مجلة دراسات وأبحاث
المجلة العربية في العلوم الإنسانية
والاجتماعية

EISSN: 2253-0363
ISSN : 1112-9751

Human and Nature between the Paradox of Control and Contract in Michel Serres' Philosophy

الإنسان والطبيعة بين مفارقة السيطرة والتعاقد في فلسفة ميشال سير

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تاريخ النشر: 2026/10/15

تاريخ القبول: 2026/09/19

تاريخ الاستلام: 2026/06/20

Abstract:

This study analyses the human-nature relationship through Michel Serres' Natural Contract. This presents the argument that technological advances have allowed humans to manipulate and dominate nature which has caused a breakdown of the human-nature relationship resulting in environmental degradation, pollution and depletion of resources with a real threat to human survival today. To address the ecological crisis there are now new ethical frameworks that are attempting to create balance between humanity and the natural world. These frameworks are examined through the philosophical lens of the 'natural contract' which is Serres' premise to rethink the human and natural relationship.

Keywords: Michel Serres; human; environment; natural contract; philosophical diagnosis.

المخلص:

نهدف من خلال هذه الورقة البحثية إلى معالجة علاقة الإنسان بالبيئة في فكر ميشال سير صاحب كتاب (العقد الطبيعي)، وهو موضوع حيوي وملزم للوجود البشري، خاصة في ظل المشكلات البيئية التي نتجت عن التطور التقني والتكنولوجي والتي استطاع الإنسان من خلالها السيطرة على الطبيعة وإخضاعها للتجارب، وهو ما أدى لاحقاً إلى ظهور علاقة تناقضية بين الإنسان والطبيعة، نجمت عنها الكثير من المشكلات البيئية كالتلوث واستنزاف الموارد الطبيعية...، فأصبح الإنسان يعيش في خطر بيئي يهدد كيانه، فبرزت الأخلاقيات الإيكولوجية محاولة خلق الانسجام والتناغم بين الإنسان والطبيعة فحاول "سير" خلق تشخيص فلسفي للعلاقة الجدلية بين الإنسان والطبيعة من خلال ميثاق العقد الطبيعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ميشال سير، الإنسان، البيئة، العقد الطبيعي، تشخيص فلسفي.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, many experts in philosophy, science, and politics have focused much of their time and energy on environmental issues. Growing concerns about the ability of our planet to withstand human activity (such as the destruction of ecosystems, the consumption of finite natural resources, and the impact of climate change) have made it clear that we all need to reconsider how we relate to the environment. One of the ways that people are beginning to do this is by changing how they view nature: instead of thinking about it as an infinite supply of natural resources, they are seeing it as a complex biological system that needs to be cared for with compassion and respect.

Philosophers today have contributed greatly to challenging the modern conception of reality, particularly the one based upon the primacy of instrumental reasoning and the expansion of technology. Many philosophical thinkers are now placing emphasis on re-evaluating what it means to be a human being

in the context of a complex network of living things. One of these thinkers is Michel Serres, who is attempting to create a new ethical framework for understanding our relationship with the natural world that goes beyond purely anthropocentric views.

Today, humans are committing numerous and serious transgressions against the environment, surpassing in both nature and methods those practiced by previous generations. The difference between us and them is evident through the scientific and technological progress achieved by human reason, which has enabled the creation of a new, artificial environment that pays little or no attention to what is known as the natural environment. This situation calls for reflection and for awakening awareness in order to build strong bonds of solidarity between humans and their environment.

Michel Serres is one of the philosophers who has addressed environmental issues from a philosophical perspective. Born in 1931 in Agen in

southern France, his early interests were oriented toward the sciences. However, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Second World War led him to raise philosophical questions related to the ethical and social problems generated by scientific progress.

He has authored many works, the most important of which include *The Natural Contract* (1990), followed by the series *Hermès* (begun in 1977), *Conversations: Science and the Contemporary Human Being* (2002), and *The Little Thumb* (2012). Most of his work revolves around a central idea: understanding the impact of new technologies on contemporary life and the necessity of establishing ethical foundations to frame the ongoing transformations of humanity.

He is also known for his critique of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which he considered incomplete insofar as it places humans at the center rather than nature. From this critique emerged his idea of the need for a new contract upon which our relationship with the environment should be based.

This raises the question: how can an ethical ecological relationship between humans and nature be established in a way that ensures human survival and meets human needs? And how can the “natural contract” achieve balance in the relationship between humans and nature?

To address this problem, we adopted the following research plan:

First: the emergence of anthropocentrism at the expense of nature. Nature has attracted human interest since ancient times, as humans have long wondered about its origins and the cause of its existence. This inquiry into nature has continued through the Renaissance and into the era of technological and scientific progress that characterizes contemporary life today.

Second: the dialectical relationship between humans and the environment in Michel Serres' thought. Is it based on the principle of belonging or transcendence?

Third: the Natural Contract as a means of achieving balance between humans and the environment. This contract represents a new dimension at the core of the human–nature problematic.

The importance of studying the relationship between humans and nature lies in the fact that it addresses a crucial and contemporary issue that touches present reality and the future of humanity as a whole. Therefore, our research relies on established scientific methodologies, including the historical method, which is necessary for tracing the historical development of the human–nature relationship. The analytical and critical methods are also employed due to the need to examine Michel Serres' key environmental ideas and to highlight the philosophical dimension that characterizes his approach and his reading of the environmental relationship that should exist between humans and the environment.

2. Signs of anthropocentrism at the expense of nature

Since its emergence on Earth, humanity has consistently been preoccupied with a single goal: winning its struggle against nature in order to harness it in service of its existential needs. This form of anthropocentrism—centered on the dominance of humans over nature and expressing human superiority over other living beings—constitutes one of the philosophical foundations of environmental problems.

The early signs of the elevation of human reason can already be traced in Greek thought, particularly among the Sophists, as reflected in Protagoras' famous statement: “Man is the measure of all things, of those that are that they are, and of those that are not that they are not.”¹ This statement reveals the idea of human existential dominance and the perceived right of humans to determine the fate of other living beings.

The prioritization of humanity over nature is also evident in the philosophy of Socrates, who paid little attention to natural philosophy and mathematics, limiting

philosophy instead to his famous maxim: "Know thyself."²

Along the same line, his student Plato elevated the intelligible world over the natural world, which he considered a realm of illusion and shadows. As he argued, his theory of being parallels his theory of knowledge, in the sense that it ascends from the sensible to the intelligible and subordinates the former to the latter.

Aristotle's view of nature is less extreme than that of Plato's; however, he still believed that man can use nature for his benefit. To him, essences exist in the physical world, while the meaning of existence is conceptualized by human thought.³ After the human-nature relationship had long been oriented toward securing existential purposes and elevating human-centeredness, philosophers of the European Renaissance began revisiting the ideas of the ancient Greeks, particularly those of Plato and Aristotle. They sought to develop and reinterpret them in order to establish a philosophical framework that would challenge religious authority.

This intellectual shift led to a serious dilemma: the rise of instrumental rationality. This form of thinking became dominant in Western societies, especially during the Industrial Revolution. It is a scientific and technical mode of thought that views both humans and nature as utilitarian and exploitable resources, tools that can be used to serve and achieve any objective.

As a result of technological and industrial expansion, the environmental crisis has worsened. In this regard, Edgar Morin states:

"Everything in this world is in crisis. To speak of crisis is to acknowledge, as we have seen, the growing presence of uncertainty. Everywhere and in everything, ambiguity increases. This means that if prophets were once able to predict and soothsayers to foresee the future, it is no longer possible for analysts to form a clear vision, nor for forecasters to predict. The present is in the process of collapse; planet Earth lives, staggers, and rolls in a state of daily upheaval

and rupture. Everything that happens is fleeting and short-lived, and the future is increasingly vanishing, especially as it comes to a halt."⁴

Here, thinkers and philosophers began to reflect on and investigate the possibility of human domination over nature. This is clearly evident in the work of the father of modern philosophy and author of the cogito, René Descartes, who considered that "reason is the most important part of the human being, and wisdom is his greatest good. The purpose of action is to ensure human well-being and happiness in this world through mastery over nature and the use of its forces for human benefit."⁵

In the same context, Francis Bacon likewise proclaimed human domination over nature. However, he added to Descartes' view that "in order to form a new intellect, a new logic is necessary to establish the foundations of discovery. Scientific breakthroughs were previously the result of chance, and reliance on pure rational reflection prevented scientific progress. The intellect, when left to its natural course, becomes abstraction, classification, comparison, and analogy, and is subject to natural illusions unless it is corrected."⁶

Bacon thus assigned the intellect an investigative mission toward nature in order to uncover its laws. He is considered the founder of the experimental method, which turned nature into a field of experimentation. As he stated, "there is no way to discover forms except through experience, that is, by turning toward nature itself. For it is only by first submitting to nature that we can control it and use it for our benefit."⁷

As for the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who is distinguished by his epistemological critique of previous intellectual paradigms, his philosophy is among those grounded in subject-centered thinking. However, he introduces the concepts of morality and freedom as defining features of the human being, thereby distinguishing humans from other living beings. This perspective ultimately renders

non-human entities as means for achieving human ends.

Kant also emphasized the necessity of connecting theoretical and practical reason, stating that "the object of reason is truth, whose manifestation is necessity and mechanism in nature, while the object of the will is the good through freedom. We also possess another faculty of judgment concerned with beauty and purposiveness, which establishes a relation between what is and what ought to be, between natural necessity and freedom."⁸.

Amid this growing crisis in the human–nature relationship, several critical perspectives have emerged seeking to establish ethical values and principles that should govern this relationship—especially with the shift of modern rationality from the sanctification of reason itself to the sanctification of human-made artifacts.

3. The Dialectical Relationship between Humans and the Environment in the Philosophy of Michel Serres

Michel Serres observes the various practices and aspects of everyday life we experience, and criticizes the prevailing belief that human beings are the center and foundation of the universe. He describes the relationship between humans and nature as one of violence and conflict, calling for the adoption of values of coexistence and care through the use of technological knowledge to understand nature rather than destroy it. According to him, modernity has produced an anthropocentric worldview that excessively glorifies human life.

As Michel Serres argues, we should stop using the term "environment" due to its implicit connotation as an anthropocentric term that places humans at the top and considers the natural world as being secondary and marginal. In this view, nature is considered the totality of all beings on Earth and in the universe (heaven) operating under their own systems, thus making nature equivalent to the cosmos.

In order for human beings and nature to have a healthy interaction with one another,

Serres believes that we need to redefine our human concepts of ourselves, particularly the idea of humans being the center of the universe. He believes this understanding has been heavily influenced by Enlightenment thought, which reinforced our society's extreme anthropocentrism through the development of science and technology during the Industrial Revolution. With this realization, we created societies based on instrumental rationality, prioritizing human interests over those of non-human beings in nature⁹

Ultimately, this has created a situation in which human beings have been viewed as the highest form of value and as the only things worthy of ultimate ends in existence. Serres states, "We have built a world in which the mind is the most essential function, and science and technology are propelling us forward; yet we keep falling down and we are creating enormous amounts of poverty, famine, and disease."¹⁰.

We cannot overlook the fact that humans are part of nature, in order to avoid falling into the paradox of human belonging to nature while simultaneously transcending it. Human beings are the only elements of nature endowed with a sense of responsibility and the capacity for knowledge. Therefore, a balance must be struck between our belonging to nature and our ability to transcend it, without reducing nature to a mere resource for exploitation.

Michel Serres argues that the dialectical relationship between humans and the natural environment is no longer based on respect and equilibrium, which has led to environmental degradation and the worsening of ecological problems. Consequently, Serres calls in his critique of philosophy for a renewed understanding of both humanity and nature, noting that philosophy has historically defined the human as the subject, nature as the object, and reason as the method—later supplemented by experience and imagination.

Modern philosophy, he argues, has remained largely faithful to Platonic and

Aristotelian frameworks, where the human being is defined as the rational, social, and political animal. In contemporary thought, humans have further consolidated their sense of subjectivity, freeing themselves from fear of nature and turning rationality and mathematical method against it as tools of control and domination¹¹.

This human domination can be traced back to Cartesian thought, where human control over nature increased significantly, particularly in light of scientific and technological advancements.

What is needed today, therefore, is an environmental ethics capable of regulating the relationship between humans and the natural environment, especially in the context of scientific progress. The human relationship with things has become increasingly instrumental, with the goal of controlling everything in nature, a tendency that has had serious consequences for contemporary life, including pollution, resource depletion, and other environmental problems.

4.The Natural Contract as a Means of Achieving Balance Between Humans and the Environment

Michel Serres, in his book *The Natural Contract*, points out that one of the causes of environmental problems lies in the cultural dimension, which has reinforced ideas promoting human centrality over nature and granting humans absolute rights over it. Today, it is necessary to reconsider this dialectical relationship that has long treated nature as a mere tool for serving human interests.

This utilitarian view must be replaced by another perspective based on coexistence, or what Serres calls the “natural contract.” While the social contract, as formulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, focused on human beings and their union within society—marking the transition from the state of nature to civil society—Serres argues that this is no longer sufficient.

As he states, “we must add to the exclusive social contract a natural contract of coexistence and mutual respect, where we set

aside domination and ownership in our relations with things, and instead adopt attitudes of admiration, care, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect.”¹²

Thus, the natural contract advocated by Serres becomes a necessary condition for sustainability and continuity.

Michel Serres proposes a new form of law in the concept of the “natural contract,” which he conceives as an ethical charter defining human duties toward nature and ensuring the dignity of the natural world. As he suggests, “global environmental change has forced us to reconsider our relationship with nature in order to negotiate between the Earth and its inhabitants.”¹³

Serres even calls for the establishment of international laws to protect animals’ rights, warning that failure to do so will have consequences. Respect for nature and all its beings thus becomes essential. Accordingly, “this natural contract is a different kind of social contract through which we achieve peace with the world and preserve our survival.”¹⁴.

To establish genuine environmental ethics, legal protection of nature is necessary in order to achieve both natural and human justice. In this regard, Serres adds: “As masters and owners, we dominate nature and reduce it to the status of an object; yet this very nature receives us, welcomes us, and sustains our lives. If our extractive and transformative activities endanger it, the threat ultimately turns back upon us. Nature sets the conditions of our existence, and from now on we must adapt it through the establishment of a natural contract.”¹⁵.

Thus, the natural contract serves to regulate the human–nature relationship by defining both rights and responsibilities. Understanding the roots of the crisis between humans and nature requires a profound philosophical rethinking of this relationship. In addition, the media can play a crucial role in raising awareness, supporting decision-making, and promoting environmental protection.

The ideas of Michel Serres on the natural contract have not escaped criticism,

particularly from the French philosopher Luc Ferry, who is among the most prominent critics of this concept. In his view, Serres' proposal represents a form of new utopian idealism, as Serres emphasizes the idea that Western modernity differs from other cultures in that it has enabled the destruction and devastation of nature.

According to Ferry, Serres exaggerates in his critique of modern industry. He argues that "this world, which we have treated merely as an object, will become a subject capable of retaliation—damaged, polluted, and mistreated, it now threatens our defeat." From this perspective emerged the idea of the natural contract, modeled after the well-known social contract: just as laws were proposed to regulate relationships among humans, similar principles are extended to govern relationships with nature.

Ferry also points out that, in this framework, humans are seen as a kind of "parasite" in an unequal relationship with nature. Therefore, he argues, humans must strive toward a more balanced relationship, one based on reciprocity and exchange ¹⁶.

Some critics, including Luc Ferry and several philosophers who have commented on Michel Serres' idea of a "natural contract" as a moral agreement between human beings and nature, claim this notion is illogical and does not reflect a true legal or enforceable contractual agreement but rather reflects a philosophical metaphor or an ethical responsibility.

However, the natural contract remains an important intellectual work and significant contribution to current environmental philosophy; in the context of ecological crises, it represents an ethical and logical solution that cannot be dismissed.

4. CONCLUSION

As can be seen by the above information, it is clear that Michel Serres advocates for changing how humanity relates to nature from one of exploitation and oppression to that of respect and co-existence to achieve ecological harmony. Nature should have the same standing as a legal being, having rights, and "humanizing" nature

means we need to develop a relationship with nature where we work together for our mutual survival. To do this, we must create an explicit legal and ethical contract between humans and the Earth.

Such a shift can only be achieved through the development of ethical responsibility aimed at limiting the impacts of technology on nature, thereby ensuring a sustainable future for humanity and protecting its ecological environment.

Environmental protection and the ethical framing of the human–nature relationship should become a social, political, and moral concern simultaneously. These intersecting concerns can help establish a balance between human rational progress and respect for nature, contributing to the emergence of an environmental philosophy based on awakening awareness.

Moreover, state-enforced laws can play a crucial role in protecting both present and future generations. This would help form a generation characterized by environmental ethics and responsibility. It would therefore be highly beneficial to integrate environmental education into curricula at all educational levels without exception, alongside awareness campaigns that emphasize the importance of preserving the environment.

Environmental education aims to train individuals to engage with environmental problems and manage them peacefully. It also enables them to acquire ethical responsibility and positive values for environmental protection. The philosophy of environmental education focuses on achieving environmental awareness. Human environmental development, therefore, is achieved through education, the environment, and its underlying philosophy. Environmental protection cannot be achieved through theories and written recommendations on paper alone; rather, it is an awareness-raising and developmental project based on consolidating beneficial habits and sound principles, including those emphasized in Islamic teachings.

This project requires the involvement of intellectuals, specialists, and academics in organizing conferences and scientific events, as well as in developing programs and curricula to be integrated into the educational

system, in order to highlight the necessity of protecting the environment, as it is the space without which human beings cannot live.

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