

Less of one and more of the other

Description

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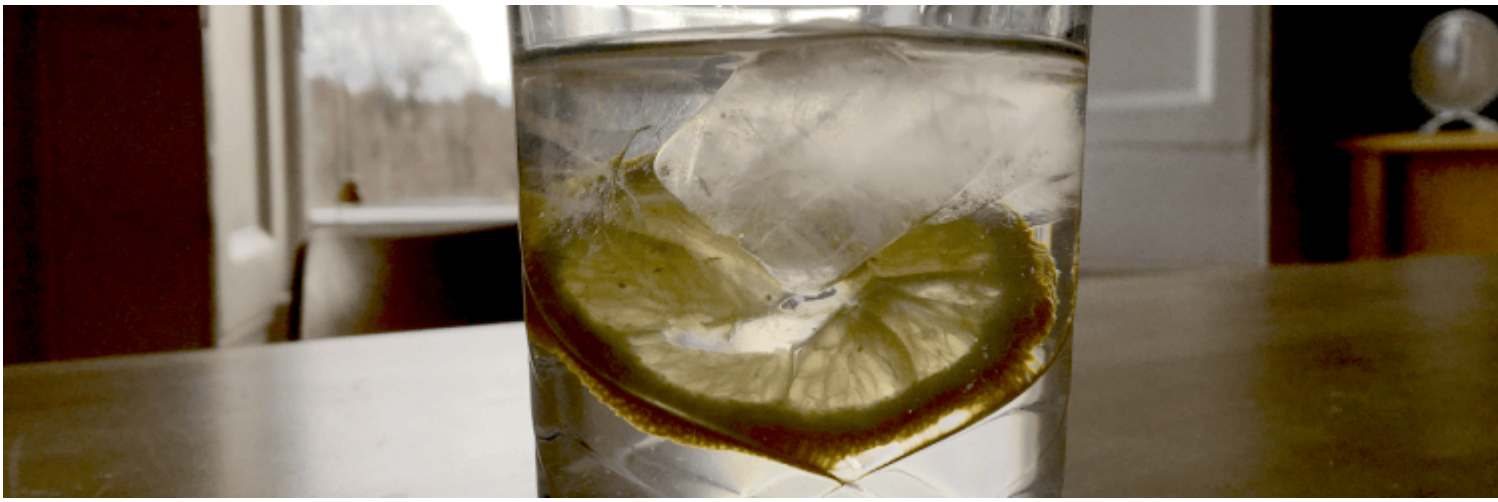
The natural is in opposition to the artificial â?? or so we think. Some oppositions lie at either end of a spectrum, with gradations between. e.g. light versus dark. Thatâ??s an opposition with an inverse relationship. The more light you add to an image, the less dark it is. The louder things get, the less quiet; the hotter, the less cold.

But *the natural versus the artificial* is not that kind of opposition. More of one does not imply less of the other.

The number and variety of species deplete at a rapid rate. The polar ice caps recede. Rain forests are felled. Nature settings get taken over by urban development or industrial scale agriculture. Itâ??s harder to find a wilderness, and activists have to fight to preserve national parks, green belts, urban parks and open space. In so far as we bundle up all these retreating entities as nature, nature is in retreat.

On the other hand, artifice, i.e. technology, grows. Thereâ??s more of it. Itâ??s a conspicuous part of peopleâ??s lives. Cities expand. Communications networks grow. As a whole, tech industries prosper, whereas labour associated with the land (i.e. nature) is in decline. Narratives about prosperity, progress, and the future are on the side of technology.

It is easy to assume that the more artificial things we fill our world with, the less space there is for nature. Nature gets crowded out by technology.



Displacement metaphor

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Thatâ??s an example of the power of the displacement metaphor, which is a subspecies of what George Lakoff calls *the containment metaphor*. Itâ??s as if there is a fixed space in which to give play to our concepts. The more you fill this space with one thing, the less space there is for another.

Itâ??s also about balance. Too much tonic and thereâ??s not enough space for the gin. The measure does not have to be 50:50, but more of one implies less of the other by virtue of the limits of the container (the glass).

People apply the displacement metaphor to other opposites: if you fill your life with sadness, thereâ??s less space for happiness. More love, less hate. These are dubious applications of the displacement metaphor. See posts on melancholy.

Nor is *nature versus artifice* that kind of opposition (of displacement). Itâ??s more like the opposition between hats and shoes. Thereâ??s something oppositional about *hats versus shoes*, but every time you buy a hat you donâ??t need to throw away a pair of shoes.

Nature versus artifice is also a bit like the opposition between structure and ornament. Having more ornamentation on a building doesnâ??t mean thereâ??s less structure, though it may be more hidden from view. In fact, adding more ornamentation can mean increasing the amount of structure to hold it all in place. As any architect knows, the two are not so neatly defined anyway.

The nature versus artifice opposition is much lumpier than the displacement metaphor implies. In any case, nature is not a quantitative thing that you can have more or less of. Nor is it even a thing, but a catch-all convenience with fluid boundaries (to mix in another metaphor).

Wicked problems

The threats mentioned in the third paragraph above are real, complicated and â??wickedâ?• (see post: Wicked problems revisited), but a raft of threats doesnâ??t imply increase from an aggressor. Nature is not driven out by more technology. More of one thing does not need to drive the other to extinction.

Itâ??s obvious now I come to think of it. As a prime example of artifice, think of digital technologies. Thereâ??s ample evidence that digital stuff helps define and redefine what we mean by the natural, and with no particular detriment to its object. It also provides tools and systems for accessing what we think of as nature. So the relationship is complicated. See post: Nature versus smartphones.

Displaced legislation

Here is an indication of the danger of the displacement metaphor. Via executive order, the US administration recently imposed an arbitrary rule that for every new law that is to be introduced, two have to be removed from the statutes. The pretext is to reduce obsolete, contradictory and complicated regulation and bureaucracy.

But as pointed out by several commentators (Huffington), the ruse threatens environmental protection legislation. It also disincentivises legislators from introducing further regulation for fear of having to remove current environmental regulations that they fought hard to put in place. Thatâ??s further evidence for the complicated relationships between one thing and another, especially where it really matters.

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Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. container
2. displacement
3. metaphor
4. wicked problems

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