

Sustainable Farming:  
Looking Into the Past In Order to Change the Future

By Malia Michele Jungert



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Joseph Zepeda, Advisor

Saint Mary's College of California

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As I was sitting on a train, admiring the rural coastline of California, an alarming realization completely overtook my thoughts. The seemingly-infinite rows of crops began to morph into one large mass, like a leviathan of the land, dominating the plains in every direction. I kept asking myself, “how did we get here?” How and why did mankind make the shift from knowing where our food was coming from to inventing a way to blindly mass produce, without regard for any environmental consequences? How did we allow ourselves to become so disconnected with the world around us? Our tendency to cling onto our human perspective and refusal to factor in our relationship with what surrounds us has gone on for far too long. Humans commonly think of themselves as being superior to or outside of nature and if this shared mentality continues, we will actually find ourselves to be outside of nature in quite a literal sense. By this I mean, that if we continue to live so destructively the earth will become uninhabitable *to us*, but it will remain in its abused form. This is the irony of the history of mankind: as we innovate and seemingly progress, we simultaneously move ourselves closer to our doomsday. This is mainly due to the fact that we tend to equate “more” to “better” and whatever mechanism that ensures an abundance, is viewed as a tool that gets us closer to greatness.

One way to remedy this way of thinking, is to turn towards the great minds of the past. The importance of proportion in part and whole relationships, along with refraining from living in excess is discussed by most of the authors of the texts we read. Thus, with this essay I will attempt to define the term “nature”, while showing how human nature has veered far away from it. I will use the United States food production system as an example of how man has separated himself from nature. Further, I would like to propose that we not only redefine human nature but

in doing so we will see that being one with nature means that we now have to transform our relationship with the earth so that we may restore the balance we once had long ago.

The philosopher, Rudolf Steiner, created the term “biodynamic farming”, which means to produce food in a way that is in harmony with nature. Many texts allude to this way of living, in that they persuade us to live in harmony with nature instead of attempting to manipulate it for our convenience. This leads me to talk about food production as a cultural issue, in that the way we grow our crops is similar to the way we live our lives. For instance, monoculture crops mirror the way we educate and raise our youth. In this society, we feel as though we need to make ourselves into machines with one function, which results in creating an anxious and gluttonous population. I call this process, specialization, which we will further analyze in the pages to come.

We all know the famous saying, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”<sup>1</sup> But, have we listened to this advice? When it comes to how we view ourselves in relation to our environment, it seems as though we are just beginning to recall these words of wisdom. First, I am going to take us back to the late 18th century, a time when literary genius illuminated a crucial understanding of what it means to be human. In order to define human nature and show how it has grown to become opposed to nature itself, I will first direct our attention to the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Shelley.

It is important to begin by stating what is meant by the word nature in a general sense. The meaning of the term has been fiddled with and manipulated in order to fit the desired intention of the individual. This is evident when comparing the two ways Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau use the word. In opposition to Hobbes, Rousseau argues that in a state of

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<sup>1</sup> George Santayana

nature, where a man's care for his own preservation is the least prejudicial to that of others, is the most peaceful, and best suited state for mankind. In his book, *A Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau argues that in a primitive state, humans are naturally empathetic and that we become jealous through the institutions of society. For example, Rousseau writes, "Hobbes said precisely the opposite as a result of introducing, illogically, into the savage man's care for his own preservation the need to satisfy a multitude of passions which are the product of society and which have made laws necessary."<sup>2</sup> Here, Rousseau argues that the "natural" greed of men described by Hobbes, is not natural at all, but one of the results of the formation of civilization. Between these two political philosophers there is a massive difference in how they define what is natural — one referring to an absolute state of nature, while the other includes the conventions of society. In this essay it seems most beneficial to define nature with the Rousseauian definition in mind, however it will also be useful to hold onto the Hobbesian definition as an example of the problematic way of thinking that humans commonly adopt. By this I mean that the Hobbesian definition of nature contributes to the separation between *human nature* and the *natural world* which surrounds them. The Rousseauian sense of the term treats the two as one, which mirrors the overall goal of this essay.

It is evident that Rousseau's philosophy is being mirrored by the monster in Mary Shelley's *The Original Frankenstein*. A brief comparison of the two texts should set the stage for what I mean by "nature" and how human beings first began to view themselves as something from which they are separate. Mary Shelley personifies social progression through her character, the monster. Specifically, she displays how the innate desire to live in excess is not innate, but a

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<sup>2</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *A Discourse on Inequality*. London, England: Penguin Books, 2003. Page 98.

result of living closely with others. For, it is not until the monster sees humans crying over their impoverished state, that he understands that pain does not necessarily have to be physical. This turning point of the monster's early life mirrors Rousseau's description of man leaving a primitive state, developing an idea of property, and adhering to a law. Before the monster had grasped the importance of property, he was consequently excluded from feeling sadness through the lack of material wealth. With this Shelley paints a picture of the separation between the mind and the rest of the cosmos, for in his primal state the monster has no notion of inequality, thus he remains in harmony with the natural order. However, once he understands the fictional importance of material wealth, he simultaneously perceives himself as inferior to those who surround him.

The contrast between the two ways Rousseau and Hobbes choose to define the word natural perfectly portrays the causal element of the problem at hand — when humans come together they create a false sense of value with the conventions they deem as universal. When people attempt to gain the objects of convention they often have a skewed idea of what is necessary. This causes them to over indulge and become greedy, which Hobbes describes as “natural” however, this seems to be completely against what is naturally beneficial to mankind. The changing perspective of Shelley's monster alludes to this idea, for whenever he becomes sad or angry through his experiences in society, he stops his anxiety by observing nature. Here, Shelly perfectly juxtaposes the gluttonous Hobbesian idea of human nature with the primitive state of nature defined by Rousseau. As the monster becomes less innocent and begins to understand the different elements of society, he enters a state of inequality ruled by convention, which mirrors how we conceptualize the meaning of the word nature. The monster's experience

shows the process of how we develop connotations in our language and culture, specifically in that we give the word nature a false meaning when we say that it is natural to wage war or natural to steal from one another. In a word, people have manipulated the way they use the term in order to justify their discordant actions; I propose that we all contemplate the severe consequences of thinking this way i.e. that it is natural to be exploitative instead of nurturing and gluttonous rather than generous.

Declaring the intended goal of his work, Rousseau writes, “What exactly is the object of this discourse? To pinpoint that moment in the progress of things when, with right succeeding violence, nature was subjected to the law; to explain by what sequence of prodigious events the strong could resolve to serve the weak, and the people to purchase imaginary repose at the price of real happiness.”<sup>3</sup> This clearly describes the shift that is currently under investigation; the movement from living in accordance with nature, to prescribing a sense of worth onto ourselves and our surroundings, thus changing the way we interact with one another. The invention of ownership was the primary cause of this movement, yet it is not completely detrimental to the success of our species. On the contrary, it is very helpful in terms of population growth and the organization of communities. However, equating one’s overall worth and sense of happiness to material wealth is where things become problematic. For, this causes men to desire more material goods so that they “stay above” their neighbors. This shared sense of insecurity and greed inevitably leads people into disputes, caused only by arbitrary designations. Again, we call this “natural,” that it is in our nature to act this way. However, this is actually a *departure* from nature and an entering into an invented reality i.e. society. Thus, if we attempt to identify where

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<sup>3</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *A Discourse on Inequality*. London, England: Penguin Books, 2003. Page 77-78.

we have gone astray in history, and rethink how we conduct society, human nature might start to look closer to nature itself, striving for harmony rather than efficiency.

Rousseau describes the separation between man and nature clearly when he states, “I see in all animals only an ingenious machine to which nature has given senses in order to keep itself in motion and protect itself, up to a certain point, against everything that is likely to destroy or disturb it... The beast chooses or rejects by instinct, man by an act of freewill.”<sup>4</sup> It goes without saying that the primitive man would not make choices that would interfere with his health and survival. However, at some point humans reached a state when we allowed desire to override rational thought. What differentiates human beings from all other living things, is the fact that we can make choices that go against what is naturally beneficial to us. We can choose to perform actions that are contrary to our health and wellbeing. Yet, this also means we don’t have to continue living in ways that are opposed to the prosperity of future generations — we have the power to start making different choices. For example, we can choose to produce our food in ways that don’t lead to pollution, the death of soil, and deforestation.

Once we choose to produce in ways that mimic nature, rather than attempting to manipulate it in order to reap an excess amount of food, we would also see a cultural shift. Mary Shelley’s monster learns that the only way to remedy his depression is to immerse himself in the outdoors and reflect on his surroundings. If we followed this, and became more connected to the environment, we too might be a happier and healthier society. Shelley writes, “These sublime and magnificent scenes afforded me the greatest consolation that I was capable of receiving. They elevated me from all the littleness of feeling; and although they did not remove my grief,

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<sup>4</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *A Discourse on Inequality*. London, England: Penguin Books, 2003. Page 87.

they subdued and tranquilized it.”<sup>5</sup> We try so hard to control, expand, and systematize the way we produce our food, however if we observe the environment that surrounds us, we might see that nature works in a way that is not just sufficient, but also in our best interest. Here, Shelley embodies Rousseau's argument once again and reminds us that human beings tend to define their nature in regards to being products of society, however we can be freed from this way of thinking through reflecting on the world around us i.e. defining our nature in regards to our existence as natural beings.

Now, in order to get a better sense of what we should be understanding nature to mean, it seems right to recall what is meant by the term nature in the Aristotelian sense. In his *Physics* Aristotle writes,

“That for the sake of which, or the end, belongs to the same department of knowledge as the means. But the *nature* is the end or that for the sake of which. For if a thing undergoes a continuous change toward some end, that last stage is the actuality that for the sake of which. (That is why the poet was carried away into making an absurd statement when he said ‘he has the end for the sake of which he was born’. For not every stage that is last claims to be an end, but only that which is best.) For the arts make their material (some simply make it, others make it serviceable), and we use everything as if it was there for our sake.”

Here, Aristotle makes an important distinction in that he defines nature in connection to the end which is best for a thing, while pointing out that humans define “what is best” in regards to what is useful. This means that we can get overtaken by the illusion of usefulness in a short period of time, not calculating future consequences. For example, we allow ourselves to become dependent on a system of agriculture that allows for a large yielding of crops, yet fail to ask whether this way of production has long term negative effects. Not only do we neglect how we

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<sup>5</sup> Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft., Percy Bysshe. Shelley, and Charles E. Robinson. *The Original Frankenstein*. New York: Vintage Books, 2009. Page 119.

are negatively impacting our surroundings, but we also act as though we are immune to any kind of retaliation done back to us. What is appalling about all of this, is that we sit back and call it “human nature” to have this mentality. The irony of humanity’s current situation is becoming increasingly more evident. For, now that we can see the physical impact of our destructive behavior, we are beginning to realize that our “art” has overtime become more of a serviceable control, not leading to what is best, but wastefulness. Historically we have let ourselves be captured by the feeling of superiority, that we can master nature with our inventions and ideas, to the extent that we forget that our actions have an impact and that nature doesn’t bend to our will. The only way nature will conform to our desires in a truly beneficial way is if we work with it, not against it. By this I mean we should be constantly aware of two things, namely that abundance doesn’t equate to necessity and that efficiency doesn’t always result in harmony.

This disharmony continues to grow and thrive through a system built on specialization. As civilizations developed and people began to view themselves in relation to the society around them, we became more and more focused on defining the individual in relation to his “place” in society. With our hearts set on “greatness,” we turn ourselves into machines and think of ourselves as monofunctional beings. From a young age we are told to strive towards one career goal, which causes us to feel pressured into conforming into one section of society, instead of seeking diverse knowledge about the world around us. This brings us to feel as though we need to be exceedingly great at one thing, which consequently causes us to feel like failures or outcasts if we fail to submit to one of society’s categories. Our modern day farming methods mirror this attitude towards life. For example, most if not all of modern agriculture is in the form of cultivating a single crop or single species of animal. This exemplifies our tendency to

manipulate nature for our temporary ease and benefit, while neglecting long term ramifications. However, specialization is not always adverse to the success of a community. Specialization can be considered an amazing thing in regards to the arts and education. It becomes problematic when our goal changes from obtaining what is necessary to excess, or when art and education turns into a means for profiting and satisfying greed.

The cause of our discordant conception of human nature has its roots embedded within western culture. In capitalist societies people find themselves equating their sense of worth to their material possessions, which creates a shared desire to unnecessarily accumulate things that have only conventional meaning. In these societies we strive to make things “better” without questioning what better really means. We seem to be in a constant race to build the newest, most impressive invention, without factoring in any negative long term effects of our “brilliance.” This again goes back to how we define goodness; for when we define what is good based on material wealth and production efficiency, we simultaneously pave a road to happiness built upon illusion rather than reality. Some ancients, such as equated goodness to health — a connotation worth reclaiming. If we were to always use technology for the purpose of maintaining our health, rather than obtaining our desires, we would be working closer with nature. Nature does not cater to arbitrary laws of man, nor does it involve itself in the meaningless sense of worth we give to objects, however it does determine our physical well being. Thus, if we consider what is naturally beneficial to our health, while performing our everyday actions, we might be able to form a different meaning of greatness. With this new understanding of what is “good” we can veer away from the damaging exploitative pattern that we have fallen into and possibly extend our time left on Earth.

We often equate greatness with efficiency, thus we focus our energy on creating machines that can do our work at exceedingly faster rates than manpower allows. Aristotle demonstrates the origin of our conception of technology in his writing, *Mechanics*. In the introduction of his writing, the orator Antiphon is quoted in which he states, “Mastered by Nature (φύσις), we overcome by Art (τέχνη).”<sup>6</sup> This quote shines a positive light on technology i.e. art, however I’d like to argue that our modern conception of technology should be understood quite differently. When we advance our technology, we should remain cautious about whether the creation of the machine/device is necessitated or superfluous. We have abandoned the concept of technology as *art*, while moving closer to using it as a kind of control or way of excessively manipulating nature. A modern-day farm is a perfect example of specialization taken so far as to turn technology into a way of excessive control. Rather than having a somewhat proportional system of food production, we choose to eradicate millions of acres of indigenous plants, install unsustainable watering systems, and top it all off with harmful pesticides. We choose to do this in order to reap the largest harvest and commonly consider these modern farming techniques to be “good” because they seem to be the most efficient. But, what is the cost of this efficiency? How are we to consider this mechanism of production to be good when it has such detrimental impacts? The comparison between traditional and modern farms demonstrates what I mean by *techne* used as an art versus as a way of control. A traditional i.e a biodynamic farm would exemplify *techne* as an art, while a modern farm is the spitting image of control and manipulation.

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<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Mechanics* 847a-21.

Before moving on, it is important to solidify what is meant by a “biodynamic farm.” Since “bio” translates to life and “dynamic” means change, the term as a whole can be interpreted as “the ability for life to adapt” or “altering-life.” Using the term “traditional” synonymously with “biodynamic” should make perfect sense when imagining what the earlier days of farming must have looked like. Prior to the industrialization of food production, a farmer would look to the earth as his guide and raise his cattle and crops in ways that do not disrupt the natural flow of the environment. For example, currently if there was a snail infestation at an industrial farm, chemicals would probably be used in order to eradicate them. However, the traditional farmer would guide his goats over to wherever the infestation had taken place, and boom “dinner is served” for the goats, and the snails eventually became fertilizer. Traditional farmers work with the earth more harmoniously and operate in ways that protect their surroundings. However, being sustainable is not always a benevolent act for someone who farms in a traditional way, but rather a prerequisite for a successful business. This is due to the fact that small farms do not typically have the infrastructure and machinery in place that allows them to aggressively make changes to the production. Yet, the traditional farmer knows that he does not need these extreme tools of control, but rather he can observe the way nature is working and artfully use those observed patterns to insure a healthy harvest. This method of food production saves the small-scale farmer from countless expenses, while protecting the earth from the negative impacts that come with corporate agriculture.

As I previously mentioned, our modern day agriculture system is a prime example of *techne* being used as an excessive control. And further, when we live under a system that attempts to control rather than nurture its people, the people will also become machines of

control in a sense. This element of our culture not only induces anxiety, but it also creates a shared weakness in the individuals, in that they are all dependent on one another in an extreme sense. For example, when one chooses to focus their entire life on becoming a great lawyer, they consequently give up their independence to bakers, doctors, shoe salesmen etc. For, all the needs that aren't fulfilled by his knowledge of the law, will have to be compensated by other professionals. With this I do not mean to criticize lawyers, but rather the extreme dynamic of our society's culture, and also to point towards the fact that the lack of independence within the individual is due to the perspective of our culture.

In his book, *Capital*, Karl Marx touches on the problematic effects of specialization by investigating the structure of the capitalist system. He does this not only in order to reveal how the system is formed, but also how it can be manipulated in order to fulfill the interests of the few, while oppressing the many. In his section concerning the division of labour, he argues that through the development of civilizations stray further away from a state of nature and closer to a reality ruled by convention. Further he describes how this causes the individuals to live their lives as if they are machines. For, he states, "If we now go into more detail, it is firstly clear that a worker who performs the same simple operation for the whole of his life converts his body into the automatic, one-sided implement of that operation."<sup>7</sup> This describes how we go from living as craftsmen and artists to button pushers that are almost indistinguishable from the machine we're operating. The transformation from human being to machine is caused by the structure of the society and the degree of industry in which the individuals live. Marx points towards the fact that once a group of people work towards the goal of producing superfluous objects i.e. "surplus

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<sup>7</sup> Marx, Karl, Cedar Paul, and Eden Paul. *Capital*. London: Dent, 1974. Page 458.

value,” rather than what is necessitated, they in hand move away from living in harmony with nature. This is evident in the case of industrial societies, for instead of living in proportion to our natural needs, we set our hearts towards obtaining excess wealth. Marx touches on this when he writes, “Castes and guilds arise from the action of the same natural law that regulates the differentiation of plants and animals into species and varieties, except that, when a certain degree of development has been reached, the heredity of castes and the exclusiveness of guilds are ordained as a law of society.”<sup>8</sup> This is an important distinction, for here he separates the natural world from those formed by people i.e. societies. Similar to Rousseau, he alludes to the fact that nature doesn’t give us any sense of inequality besides that of the physical kind, in other words, our social structure has become a constructed governing tool without having any resemblance to nature itself.

The way we produce our food mirrors the monofunctional essence of our culture and exemplifies how instead of working with the land, humans choose to destroy what was naturally provided. We carve into the land rows of crops, infused with pesticides and roofed by plastic tarps. We have relied on this kind of food production for decades, yet we are only just beginning to question whether this kind of farming negatively impacts the nutritional value of our food. This exemplifies one of the results of the conceded western mentality — the outcome of our constant negligence of the fact that everything we do will in some way come back to haunt us. We are so comforted by the fact that we have enough food on our plates, that we allow ourselves to be fed blindly. We’re quick to trust the grocery stores we go to, without realizing that the food

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<sup>8</sup> Marx, Karl, Cedar Paul, and Eden Paul. *Capital*. London: Dent, 1974. Page 459.

production isn't controlled by farmers at all, but by a group of businessmen who have very little concern for our health or the environment.

The reason we have this kind of food production is due to the fact that our system is broken and like all of our departments of public resources, agriculture is governed by the few that benefit from oppressing the many. This is extremely problematic, for when the producer is not at the same time also the consumer, the interests of the two can be opposed to one another. For example, when the farmer is not the one eating the food he produces, but selling it to others, he is forced to give it a certain value. The farmer wants this value to be high, in order to maximize his profit, but the consumer wants the cost to be as low as possible, thus a conflict of interest arises immediately after the farm is disconnected from those being fed. However, this conflict is not necessarily detrimental, for we can set limitations to how our agricultural needs are met. The sad part is, that in the U.S. these limitations were never set and before we were even conscious of the issues that come from the monopolization of food, those running the government had already taken control of production and advertised it as something good for us. Through the guise of abundance, those in power tricked us into thinking that pesticide filled tomatoes being grown under rows of plastic roofing, is something revolutionary and beautiful. They used our inclination towards laziness as a marketing tactic, by showing us how little effort is required of the shopper who leisurely strolls through supermarkets, finding everything they'll need in one place. As a society our desire for ease outweighed any potential doubt we might have had with the system. It is precisely this desire that causes us to relinquish our rights to a few businessmen. These rights make up what we now refer to as "food sovereignty" i.e. the power to choose what food is produced and how the production is achieved. Once we rely on corporate

grocery stores, we consequently give up our ability to know where our food is actually coming from and how it is being produced. If we were to have a more evenly proportioned system of food production, communities would be forced to become more involved in the production process. Even if you were not working on the farm, you would at least have a sense of where your food was being grown and be able to access organic food at lower costs. In produce aisles the variety of different vegetables and fruits is controlled by transportability. By this I mean that we only have access to a fraction of the produce we potentially could have, if we localized farming. For, grocery stores only provide food that can withstand miles and miles of transportation. Thus, if we change the system to be run by the individual communities, we would not only be giving the power of food sovereignty to the people, but also expand our choices of what we can eat.

Traditional or “biodynamic” farms may not resemble supermarkets in their immediate appearance, yet they essentially share the same goal, in that both aim towards providing all the sustenance an individual could need. The way they go about fulfilling this goal is what causes them to differ, for a biodynamic farm uses self sustaining methods, whereas a supermarket requires the usage of modern industrial farms in order to keep its shelves stocked. At this point in western civilization, we are far too reliant on the supermarket method for it to be reasonable to ask everyone to leave their nine to five jobs to adopt a sustainable farming lifestyle. It isn’t out of the question however, to ask that we scale down our food production system to become more community based.

In the early 1920s, Rudolf Steiner began to develop the biodynamic farming method as an attempt to show how farming should be viewed as a holistic act. Instead of focusing on a

single crop, a biodynamic farmer relies on the power of variety, viewing the animals he raises and the plants he grows as mutually benefiting organisms. Again, the biodynamic approach is also considered to be traditional because of the fact that in the past farmers would be forced to rely on the powers of nature, rather than on the technology of men in order to reap what they sowed. Thus, the biodynamic farmer eliminates the use of chemicals and minimizes the amount of machinery needed to produce a large bounty of food. This kind of farmer views every living being on his farm in connection to one another and attempts to see how the living beings could help cultivate the land. One might call this action a kind of “manipulation of nature” and it is in some sense, however traditional approaches end up benefiting man without abusing the environment around him, which differs immensely with modern operations. While learning about this method of farming, I was constantly reminded of the arguments of great philosophers and poets. Most of all I was bombarded by the importance of balance. Our false perception of greatness can skew our idea of what leads to having a happy and balanced life. For example, In his series of poems Lao Tzu writes,

The way that is bright seems dull;

The way that leads forward seems to lead backwards;

The way that is even seems rough.<sup>9</sup>

When Lao Tzu says, “the way that leads forward seems to lead backwards,” I am led to think that he means that human beings often think that they are advancing in positive ways, when in actuality we are doing more harm than good. Thus, when we simplify our lives and attempt to live aligned with our original natural state, we consequently experience a feeling of a positive

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<sup>9</sup> Lau, D. C. *Lao Tzu ; Tao Te Ching*. New York: Penguin Books, 1963. XLI - Page 48.

progression towards harmony. Also the way of traditional farming may “seem rough,” but is actually even. By this I mean that initially biodynamic farming seems rough and difficult, especially in comparison to farming that relies on modern day techniques. However, over time the biodynamic farmer finds more ease and reliability through his way of farming because his farm will grow, thrive, and replenish itself by using renewable resources. It is unrealistic to think that we could all stop our lives completely and become biodynamic farmers, however we can attempt to make a food production system based on these methods. Decreasing the scale of production and localizing agriculture would not only help the environment, but would allow us to be knowledgeable about our food, provide access to people without fresh produce, and help mend our severed connection with nature .

As time goes by we see that people are becoming more and more environmentally conscious. Starting at five years old, millennials were taught of the importance of reducing our use of resources, the impacts of recycling, and the dangers of climate change. However, we are constantly left with this vague notion of how “to go green” on an individual level, while failing to address the systemic issues at hand. In order to see real change, it is obvious that we have to reshape the society we live in. With this essay it was my intention to show how some of the great writers of the past allude to how we might be able to mend the broken system we have created. Specifically, how we should reassociate ourselves with the term human nature in a way that is not opposed to nature itself. Overall, we must attempt to work with the balance that nature provides rather than manipulating in order to satisfy temporary desires.