

# Enlightenment Epistemology and the Climate Crisis

Asad Zaman

[Akhuwat University, Pakistan]

Copyright: Asad Zaman, 2024

You may post comments on this paper at

<http://rwer.wordpress.com/comments-on-rwer-issue-no-108/>

## Introduction

At first glance, it appears that industrialization, with its rampant overproduction and overconsumption, stands as the primary antagonist in our climate crisis narrative. However, this surface-level perception overlooks a more profound shift that lies beneath: an epistemological revolution birthed in the European Enlightenment. This era marked a pivotal transition in our relationship with the planet, from Mother Earth to a dead machine. Turbayne (1962) explores the significance in the change of metaphor in depth. This essay seeks to unravel this transformation in thought and its subsequent paving of the road to our current environmental challenges. Our solution lies not in mere technological or policy changes but in a fundamental revolution in thought—a revolution that reclaims the roles of heart, soul, and lived experience in shaping our knowledge. By embracing these often-neglected dimensions, we can forge a path towards a more harmonious interaction with our world, addressing the root causes of the climate crisis.

## Historical Context of the Enlightenment

The genesis of the European Enlightenment can be traced back to the religious wars that ravaged Europe, a turbulent period that starkly illuminated the limitations of theology as the sole foundation for social and political theory. This era of conflict laid bare the urgent need for a new basis upon which to construct societal norms and governance—one that could transcend sectarian divides and offer a stable, peaceful coexistence. This necessity birthed an intellectual revolution, a move away from the scholastic tradition which had long intertwined social theory with biblical teachings. In this historical crucible, the Enlightenment emerged as a bold response, a movement that endeavored to redefine the very foundations of knowledge. Scholasticism, with its deep roots in religious doctrine, was set aside in favor of a new approach that sought to build knowledge from ground up, free from theological underpinnings. This marked a radical shift from a world view deeply imbued with religious interpretations to one anchored in secularism. Faced with the challenge of constructing a body of knowledge devoid of these traditional foundations, Enlightenment thinkers turned to observable facts and logic as their new cornerstones. This was a decisive step, an attempt to create a universal framework of understanding that relied solely on empirical evidence and rational deduction (see Zalta (2017) for an overview). It was a move towards a world view that prized objective reality, measurable and quantifiable, over the subjective realms of intuition, emotion, and lived experience.

## **The Crisis of Knowledge and Enlightenment's Limitations**

Our current environmental predicament is fundamentally a crisis of knowledge, rooted in the Enlightenment's narrow conceptualization of epistemology. This shift fostered an illusion of objectivity that has since permeated our understanding of the world, particularly in the context of societal dynamics. The Enlightenment's emphasis on objective knowledge marginalized the subjective realms of emotional intelligence, moral intuition, and diverse lived experiences. This exclusion led to a worldview that erroneously equates scientific rationality with absolute truth, consequently overlooking the multifaceted and nuanced nature of human experience and its interaction with the environment. See Zaman (2015) for a detailed discussion of the deification of science.

To truly integrate heart, soul, and lived experiences into our understanding of the world, we must challenge the very notion of objective knowledge as the sole arbiter of truth, especially in the realm of social sciences. For example, Berger and Luckmann (1966) have argued that truth is a social construct. Society, when viewed as a collective of lived experiences, presents a spectrum of realities, all equally valid yet inherently diverse. This perspective acknowledges that what is considered 'objective' often reflects dominant narratives, sidelining alternative ways of experiencing and understanding the world. By embracing this multiplicity of truths, we open ourselves to a richer, more inclusive understanding of our environment and our place within it. Such a shift in perspective is crucial for addressing the environmental challenges we face, as it fosters a deeper, empathetic connection with the planet and its diverse inhabitants, moving beyond the exploitation and detachment engendered by the Enlightenment's limited view.

## **Integrating a Multifaceted Understanding of Knowledge**

The challenge of rectifying our strained relationship with the environment calls for a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of knowledge. Moving beyond the Enlightenment's legacy of objective empiricism, we must embrace an epistemological approach that values the subjective, the intuitive, and the emotional as legitimate sources of wisdom. This broader view of knowledge transcends the simplistic binary of right and wrong, opening up space for a spectrum of experiences and perspectives that reflect the complex reality of human existence.

In practical terms, this means recognizing and valuing diverse cultural narratives and indigenous wisdoms that have long maintained a harmonious relationship with nature. These perspectives offer invaluable insights into sustainable living and environmental stewardship, having evolved through centuries of deep, lived interaction with the natural world. By integrating these varied sources of knowledge, we can develop more effective and context-sensitive environmental policies and practices. Senturk et. al. (2020) provide a multiplex epistemological framework, suitable for exploring multiple layers of validity and diversity.

Moreover, this expanded understanding of knowledge encourages the cultivation of empathy and a sense of interconnectedness with all forms of life. It promotes a worldview where environmental responsibility is not just a scientific or economic consideration, but a moral imperative rooted in a deep appreciation of our shared existence on this planet. This shift is crucial for building a future where human activities are in balance with the Earth's ecosystems, ensuring the well-being of both current and future generations.

## **Redefining Environmental Engagement and Education**

The imperative to reconstruct our knowledge for environmental harmony necessitates a radical rethinking of how we engage with and educate about the environment. This new approach calls for a synergistic integration of scientific understanding with philosophical, ethical, and emotional insights, breaking away from the confines of Enlightenment's rigid objectivity. This interdisciplinary blend is key to developing a comprehensive view of environmental issues, one that recognizes the complexity and interdependence of natural systems. Spash (2024) provides a detailed discussion.

In this context, environmental education transcends traditional scientific curricula, encompassing a broader spectrum that includes ethical considerations, cultural narratives, and emotional connections to the natural world. Such an inclusive educational approach equips individuals with a deeper, more empathetic understanding of environmental issues, fostering a sense of responsibility and stewardship. Policy-making too must reflect this shift in perspective. Instead of purely utilitarian approaches, policies need to account for the diverse experiences and needs of different communities, ensuring that environmental solutions are equitable and culturally sensitive. This means prioritizing long-term ecological balance over short-term economic gains and acknowledging the intrinsic value of the natural world beyond its utilitarian benefits. Zaman (2021) provides more extensive discussion.

By embracing this expanded framework of knowledge, we pave the way for more holistic and sustainable environmental practices. It's about nurturing a global community that not only understands the scientific aspects of climate change but also feels a deep, emotional connection to our planet, inspiring collective action towards preserving and cherishing our shared home.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the climate crisis extends beyond the realms of industrialization and technological advancements; it is fundamentally an epistemological crisis born from the Enlightenment's limited perspective on knowledge. Our challenge is to shift from a purely empirical and rational understanding of the world to one that richly integrates the emotional, the spiritual, and the subjective. This holistic approach, recognizing multiple truths and diverse perspectives, draws on both Enlightenment rationality and post-modern insights. See Zaman (2019) for one approach.

The practical implications of this paradigm shift are profound and far-reaching. It calls for an approach to environmental activism and education that combines scientific knowledge with emotional resonance, as exemplified by figures like Greta Thunberg. Her ability to connect with the public on an emotional level, while underscoring the scientific realities of climate change, embodies the synthesis of heart and science that is crucial for effective environmental advocacy.

As we reconceptualize our place in the natural world, our goal is not to conquer, but to steward. It's about creating a future where our actions are informed by a deep understanding of and connection to the planet, fostering a global community motivated by a shared responsibility for its well-being. This epistemological shift promises a future where the health of our planet and its inhabitants is woven into the very fabric of our knowledge and existence, inspiring collective actions toward a sustainable and harmonious coexistence.

## References

- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Şentürk, Recep et. al. (2020). *Comparative theories and methods: between uniplexity and multiplexity*. İstanbul: İbn Haldun University Press.
- Spash, Clive L. (2024) *Foundations of social ecological economics: The fight for revolutionary change in economic thought*. Manchester University Press.
- Turbayne, C. M. (1962). *The myth of metaphor*. Yale University Press.
- Zalta, E. N. (Ed.). (2017). "Enlightenment." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/enlightenment/>
- Zaman, A. (2015) "Deification of science and its disastrous consequences." *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education* 6.2: 181-197.
- Zaman, A. (2019) "Islam's gift: An economy of spiritual development." *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 78.2: 443-491.
- Zaman, A. (2021). 'Reclaiming our lives and our planet'. *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education*, 12(2), 102–113.

**Author contact:** [asad.zaman@alumni.stanford.edu](mailto:asad.zaman@alumni.stanford.edu)

---

### SUGGESTED CITATION:

Asad Zaman, "Enlightenment Epistemology and the Climate Crisis", *real-world economics review*, issue no. 108, July 2024, pp. 29–32, <http://www.paecon.net/PAEReview/issue108/Zaman108>

**You may post and read comments on this paper at** <http://rwer.wordpress.com/comments-on-rwer-issue-no-108/>