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## Introduction: Nature, Environmental Ethics, and Continental Philosophy

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Have continental and environmental philosophy anything valuable to say to one another? Perhaps not: so far, most work within environmental ethics has emerged from and drawn on Anglo-American philosophical traditions, especially those of metaethics and normative ethics, rather than Continental European philosophical traditions. To be sure, some strands of continental philosophy have had an important influence on the development of environmental ethics: most notably, the Frankfurt School's criticisms of modern science and of the disenchantment and domination of nature (see Adorno and Horkheimer 1997), and Heidegger's study of how technology reveals natural things as resources (Heidegger 1977). But, until recently, there has been relatively little self-conscious reflection – from either environmental or continental philosophers – on the specific contributions which continental philosophy, insofar as it is a distinctive tradition, might make to environmental thought.<sup>1</sup> This situation has begun to change with several recent publications, such as Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine's (2003) edited collection *Ecophenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, and Bruce V. Foltz and Robert Frodeman's (2004) collection *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. This special issue aims to continue the discussion of how the continental tradition might advance or transform environmental thinking, both by reconsidering authors such as Kant, Schelling, Nietzsche and Heidegger, and by considering how themes and concepts from continental philosophy and social theory – including Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh, Foucault's notion of discipline, and Bourdieu's social critique of taste – bear on environmental practice and theory.<sup>2</sup>

Inevitably, as scholars have turned to the question of how continental philosophy might contribute to environmental thought, conflicting answers have appeared. In his article 'Nature as Origin and Difference: On Environmental Philosophy and Continental Thought', Steven Vogel argues that continental philosophy's important contribution is to consider nature to be socially and historically constructed, both in that natural things are always shaped and affected by our practical engagements with them, and in that ideas of untouched nature and wilderness are just that – mere (socially and historically situated) ideas (Vogel

1998: 171).<sup>3</sup> Vogel's claim that the worthwhile continental approaches to nature endorse social constructionism articulates the widely-held association between continental philosophy and social constructionism, an association which reflects the influence of recent thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault. However, in their introduction to *Rethinking Nature*, Foltz and Frodeman outline a contrasting view of the environmental contribution of continental philosophy. They argue that Anglo-American ethics relies on a concept of the environment 'which has largely, and uncritically, been borrowed from the natural sciences' (2004: 7), for example, the concepts of ecosystems, biodiversity, or habitats. Foltz and Frodeman object that scientific theories are problematic because they are (i) detached from our immediate, lived, experience of nature and are (ii) inextricable from the 'modern project of the technological domination of nature' (5). In response to these problems, Foltz and Frodeman maintain, a number of thinkers in the continental tradition have sought to reflect on our lived experience of nature and to develop 'a new "metaphysics" of nature' (6).<sup>4</sup> Above all, Foltz and Frodeman suggest, continental thought about nature is distinctive in two ways: (1) its central concept is, precisely, that of nature rather than the environment; (2) its reflection on nature is closer to metaphysical reflection on what nature is than to ethical reflection on nature's value, our obligations to it, or how to resolve conflicts amongst these obligations.<sup>5</sup>

In this introduction, I want to support Foltz and Frodeman's interpretation of continental philosophy by showing that at least one important strand within it does engage in the kind of metaphysical rethinking of nature that they describe: namely, the strand of continental philosophy which I will call 'philosophy of nature'. By this, I understand an approach to thinking about nature which originates in the 1790s and 1800s with the German Romantics and Idealists (including Schelling and Hegel), and which persists, in modified form, within the work of some subsequent continental thinkers – my example will be Heidegger.<sup>6</sup> Philosophy of nature, I will suggest, thinks of nature neither as the totality of material objects and processes, nor as all those material objects and processes which are free from deliberate human interference, but as (in a sense to be explained) identical to being. This way of thinking of nature no doubt sounds unfamiliar and obscure. As John J. Compton has remarked, we today 'do *not* understand by "philosophy of nature" any inclusive, continuing or compelling philosophical agenda' (1988: 66). But, by re-examining philosophy of nature against the background of contemporary environmental concerns, we can identify some ways in which it remains relevant and worth continuing. Arguably, environmentalists need to create and disseminate new conceptions of nature in order to challenge the damaging attitudes and practices that stem from currently dominant conceptions. Since philosophy of nature thinks of nature, unusually, as identical to being, it offers (often radically) new conceptions of nature, and can therefore contribute to this task of reconceiving nature. Let me try to defend these claims.

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Several theorists have argued that environmentally damaging activities and institutions have their roots in basic and widely held conceptions of nature. According to Carolyn Merchant's influential argument, the conception of nature as a mechanism (that is, a vast concatenation of efficient causes) came to prominence during the early modern period, superseding an earlier view of nature as a living organism. This mechanistic conception implied that nature was intrinsically valueless and purposeless, thereby legitimating unrestrained interference with, and manipulation of, nature (Merchant 1980). After all, if nature in itself has no purposes or value, then our interference with it cannot be condemned on the grounds of frustrating these purposes or reducing this value. One problem with Merchant's historical narrative is that it overestimates the dominance of mechanistic views in the modern world (see, for instance, Elaine Miller's contribution to this issue on Merchant's neglect of Romanticism). I submit, though, that Merchant is right that broadly mechanistic views of nature have become more widespread and entrenched in modernity than they were previously, and that these views at least complicate any attempt to criticise human interference with natural processes. Environmentalists therefore have reason to seek out alternative, non-mechanistic, views of nature, since these views should make it more straightforwardly possible to think critically about human interference with nature. For example, given an 'organicist' view of nature, we can criticise those kinds of interference that frustrate the purposes or developmental tendencies of living things. In seeking out non-mechanistic views of nature, we are rethinking nature metaphysically: rethinking what nature is fundamentally like and what kinds of entities, phenomena, and processes it contains.<sup>7</sup> This need not involve constructing an entirely unprecedented view of nature (if that were possible); rather, in rethinking nature we would be well-advised to revisit existing non-mechanistic conceptions of nature, including those articulated by continental philosophers of nature.<sup>8</sup>

One might question these arguments for the environmental relevance of philosophy of nature in at least two ways. Firstly, one might think that when public and private bodies pursue environmentally harmful policies, they generally do so not because their members are committed, even tacitly, to any assumptions about the character of nature, but simply because they are preoccupied with narrowly defined economic goals. However, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Adorno and Horkheimer argue that this kind of preoccupation with economic goals reflects a certain mode of thinking which they call 'instrumental rationality' and which, they believe, is inseparably connected with humanity's centuries-long pursuit of domination over nature (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997). When we reason instrumentally, we work out the best means to fulfil pre-existing ends, without reflecting on the worth of these ends (e.g. the ends of economic prosperity or global competitiveness). According to Adorno and Horkheimer, this instrumental mode of reasoning originally developed because humans wanted to work out the best way to control and dominate nature. The structure

of instrumental rationality, they claim, remains shaped by its original dominating function (1997: 37). Moreover, for Adorno and Horkheimer, our desire to control nature has also motivated us to form an increasingly mechanistic and mathematised picture of nature, because this picture facilitates prediction and therefore control. Adorno's and Horkheimer's arguments suggest that even when environmentally destructive policies and practices do not appear to stem from underlying conceptions of nature, on closer inspection the instrumental modes of thought which they reflect are inextricably, if indirectly, linked to mechanistic models of nature. Rethinking our basic conceptions of nature therefore remains a necessary part of any challenge to those practices.

The second possible objection is that continental philosophy of nature makes little genuine contribution to environmental thought because the conceptions of nature to be found in this tradition have no concrete implications for either ethics or policy. Supposing, for instance, that nature is (in some sense) an organism, it is not obvious that any particular set of obligations to nature follows from this view, and without such obligations we have no basis from which to derive public policies (Michelfelder 2004: 240). Indeed, some continental thinkers, such as Heidegger, implicitly oppose any attempt to formulate environmental policy, on the grounds that this presupposes a project of 'managing' nature and so, indirectly, an understanding of nature as a stock of resources – the very understanding which he believes to be responsible for widespread destruction of nature. Of course, it is debatable whether policy really must have these presuppositions, but clearly a tension exists between continental philosophy's orientation towards fundamental metaphysical questions about nature and our need to formulate determinate environmental policies. Still, perhaps we could say that the contribution of continental philosophy of nature to environmental thought is not that it directly entails particular ethical obligations and policies, but that it orientates us to think critically about the dominant ways in which policy options are being framed and to consider what general metaphysical and ethical assumptions might underlie these ways of framing options. We could also reflect on what kinds of new options might enter the scene if different metaphysical assumptions stood in the background of discussion.

So far, I have spoken of (continental) 'philosophy of nature' as an undifferentiated whole, in a necessarily somewhat vague and general way. To concretise my claims about the environmental relevance of this tradition, I should now sketch in greater detail how philosophers within this tradition have conceived of nature. The texts which inaugurate the tradition are the theoretical and literary writings of the German Romantic philosopher-poets Friedrich Hölderlin and Friedrich von Hardenberg (pen-named Novalis). Hölderlin's influential early fragment 'Judgement and Being' (1795) argues that all consciousness involves the subject relating to objects via judgement, through which the subject distinguishes objects from itself. Now, Hölderlin argues that, for any subject to be able to relate to objects, there must be something unitary in virtue of which they

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can come into relation across their difference. This unity is, he states, ‘*Being* [which] expresses the combination of subject and object. Where subject and object are directly, not just partially, united, ... there and nowhere else can there be talk of *being as such*’ (Hölderlin 2003: 191). However, this ‘blessed unity, being’ cannot be known, according to Hölderlin, because all knowledge and consciousness require experience of objects from which we differentiate ourselves as subjects – a differentiation which is absent within being. Insofar as we are conscious, judging subjects, being is lost to us.

Now, unitary being, Hölderlin also maintains, is *nature*. This equation of being with nature can be seen, for instance, in his novel *Hyperion*, when the protagonist laments that ‘an instant of reflection hurls me down. I reflect, and ... the world in its eternal oneness is gone; nature closes her arms, and I stand like an alien before her and do not understand her’ (Hölderlin 1990: 4). Hölderlin does not spell out his reasons for identifying being with nature, but we can reconstruct them. Neither finite conscious subjects, nor the objects of their consciousness, can ultimately differ from being, otherwise being would not be entirely unitary. Being must therefore split within itself into the plurality of finite subjects each of whom, in turn, distinguishes between objects. That being gives itself this complex articulation means that it operates in the manner of an organism, which likewise organises itself into a system of interrelated but different elements. To Hölderlin, then, it makes sense to equate being with a kind of gigantic, macrocosmic, organism. In turn, this macrocosmic organism can be equated with nature, if the latter is regarded as a whole, self-organising, system.

We find exactly this reasoning for equating being with nature spelled out in Novalis’ 1795-96 notebooks, the *Fichte-Studies*. He comments that ‘nature’ has four principal meanings: (1) the essence of a thing; (2) the totality of finite material objects, including finite human bodies; (3) the totality of specifically non-human objects; (4) ‘the state of a thing that comes into being for its own sake without subjective causality’ (Novalis 2003: 85). That is, by (4), anything is natural that emerges or develops spontaneously without deliberate intervention from human agents. It follows from (4) that something is natural when it is not artificially produced or formed but is self-forming, self-producing – in short, organic. On this picture, even inanimate things must, insofar as they are natural, be understood to somehow approximate, derivatively, to the mode of being of the organic. This implies that nature in the sense of the totality of non-human material objects is actually the totality of organisms (and of entities which approximate to organisms). Moreover, since nature exists as this totality spontaneously (human beings do not produce nature), nature is itself natural – self-producing – and so comprises one large-scale organism, within which all the other finite organisms are interrelated as members. Accordingly, Novalis, like Hölderlin, equates nature with ‘being’ (e.g. Novalis 2003: 56), where being is at once absolutely unitary, self-differentiating, and self-organising. This absolutely unitary being/nature is not reducible to the sum-total of finite mate-

rial objects but precedes, and structures itself into, these objects. Hölderlin and Novalis thus distinguish nature as the sum-total of finite material objects from nature in this more primordial sense as an absolute whole.

Noticeably, there is a tension between Hölderlin's claim (which Novalis repeats) that, because knowledge is necessarily judgemental and divisive, we cannot know unitary being/nature, and Hölderlin's and Novalis' claim (to know that) being/nature is unitary, self-differentiating, and self-organising. That is, the writings of the early German Romantics are ambiguous between two distinct accounts of our knowledge of unitary nature/being. For clarity, I shall first outline how these accounts pertain to being, bracketing for now the identity of being with nature. On the first account, we can know about unitary being, which forms the primary object of study of metaphysics. Hölderlin's erstwhile friend Hegel takes this option: he argues in his 1812-16 *Science of Logic* that 'pure being', in its absolute simplicity and distinctionless unity, is the reality which metaphysics must first describe. He incorporates this description of being into a comprehensive theory of the fundamental structures of reality, all of which result from being (see Hegel 1969).

According to the second alternative – pursued by the later Schelling – we can sense that there is unitary being, and we can think about it, but cannot know about it, since knowing requires classifying something in terms of its distinguishing predicates, whereas being precedes and preconditions all distinctions. But although we cannot know *what* being is, we can apprehend *that* being is – we apprehend the 'that' (*daß*), the sheer fact of existence, the fact that 'there is' being.<sup>9</sup> This apprehension is not cognitive (since cognition necessarily involves predication), but has the status merely of sensuous representation, which brings the fact of existence directly before us. Nonetheless, Schelling believes that we can continue to think about being, as long as we do so in a way that acknowledges its unknowability for us. This kind of thinking about being is not an instance of traditional metaphysics – namely, the attempt to know about being as part of a comprehensive account of the fundamental structure of the universe. Rather, Schelling is proposing a kind of 'post-metaphysical' thinking about being which constantly acknowledges that being is unknowable and is simply given to us, and which derives further conclusions concerning being only on that basis.

What do these 'metaphysical' and 'post-metaphysical' philosophies amount to when being's identity with nature is fed into the picture? The metaphysical approach aims for knowledge of nature/being and, since nature/being develops organically, this approach aims to know how nature/being structures itself into the entire world and what the world's basic features are as they result from this self-organising activity of nature. Novalis' notebooks on science, the *Allgemeine Brouillon* (1798-99), illustrate this type of organicist metaphysics. On his account, at every level in nature we detect organised systems of organised processes, and the interlocking of these organised systems must be understood to derive from an activity of the whole in organising itself. Novalis assumes that the natural



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sciences provide us with detailed knowledge of these various processes, and that the philosopher's task is to arrange and reinterpret this scientific material in view of nature's overarching organisation.

What if, on the other hand, nature/being cannot be known but may only be thought about in ways that admit its unknowability? In that case, the claim that being is nature and is organic cannot be a metaphysical claim to know what properties being has. In stating that being is nature, we cannot be identifying being with a nature that is understood to be defined by a given set of properties. Rather, the claim 'being is nature' must introduce a non-standard identification of *nature* with the 'that', the sheer fact of existence. This may look like an uninteresting stipulative redefinition of nature. However, in his 1939 lecture course 'On the Essence and Concept of *Physis* in Aristotle's *Physics* B, I' (Heidegger 1998), Heidegger succeeds in connecting this non-standard understanding of nature as 'that' to aspects of our more ordinary ideas about nature. He does so by finding this non-standard understanding of nature within the pre-Socratic concept of *physis* (on this, see also Cooper's article in this issue).

According to Heidegger, '*physis*' refers to a process of spontaneous emergence into appearance, a process which always hides itself just as it results in the appearance of determinate entities. On this view, *physis* is being because being is not an entity but the sheer fact that existence unfathomably surges up. This unfathomable surging up just is the spontaneous genesis, or coming-into-appearance, that is *physis*. This spontaneous genesis is the source of all entities, according to Heidegger, not only of those entities that are specifically 'natural' as opposed to being 'artificial'. Moreover, he contends, *physis* does not operate organically – it is a process of genesis with no clear end-state or *telos* (see Glazebrook 2000: 104-5), and, being non-telic, it cannot be rightly said to be organic. Again, Heidegger's reflections on *physis* are not simply an example of metaphysics, because he insists that *physis* cannot be known but always becomes hidden by the world of finite appearances. Any adequate reflection on *physis* must acknowledge that it is no finite, knowable, appearing entity, but the unknowable precondition of the existence of such entities.<sup>10</sup>

In this brief overview, I have tried to explain how philosophy of nature originates within German Romanticism, and I have looked at one place in subsequent continental philosophy where this current of thought identifiably persists, namely the work of Heidegger. But one might remain unpersuaded by my claim that these rethinkings of nature hold value for environmental philosophy. One might accept that some rethinking of nature is necessary, but hold that this need only consist in rethinking the character of finite natural things (e.g. by reconceiving them to have intrinsic agency or vitality), and need hardly involve abstruse speculations on the knowability or otherwise of being. Yet the possibility that we might need to reconceive nature at a deeper level should not be dismissed out of hand. We might need to engage in a very far-reaching rethinking of nature indeed if we are to avoid reproducing elements of the dominant views that (*ex*



*hypothesi*) must be opposed. Consider, for example, Heidegger's claim that organicist views regard organisms as artefacts that make themselves according to an internal blueprint, so that organicism privileges the perspective of the human artisan and thus obscures the spontaneity of *physis* (Heidegger 1998: 194-5). Potentially, then, the anti-mechanistic ideas that are most immediately accessible contain their own problems from an environmental perspective, and need to be subjected to another round of rethinking.

In introducing philosophy of nature, I have not meant to suggest that this tradition exhausts the resources that continental philosophy can bring to environmental thought. However, I hope I have shown that, *pace* Vogel's identification of what is valuable in continental philosophy with social constructionism about nature, there exists a significant – and worthwhile – strand in continental philosophy which engages in rethinking nature 'metaphysically' (as Foltz and Frodeman have claimed).<sup>11</sup> Still, not all the papers in this issue would identify this 'metaphysical' rethinking as the most important or environmentally relevant aspect of the continental tradition. From the perspective of Allan Greenbaum, who applies and develops Bourdieu's social critique of taste with reference to environmental aesthetic judgements, this entire interpretation of nature as complex, self-organising, and spontaneous might be merely a reflection of certain Kantian aesthetic preferences characteristic of the educated middle class – contrary to my claims for the originality and radically alternative status of philosophy of nature. This should make us pause before endorsing the philosophical interpretation of nature as a self-organising whole. Equally, though, we should not be too quick to discount the possibility that continental philosophy of nature can pose an intriguing challenge to more conventional views.

## NOTES

Thanks to Isis Brook and Alan Holland for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this introduction.

<sup>1</sup> Whether there *is* a distinctive continental tradition in philosophy is contested, since so-called continental and Anglo-American philosophers actually share many preoccupations. But for a forceful defence of the distinctiveness of continental philosophy, see Critchley 2001. Another question is what environmental thought can contribute to continental philosophy. My answer is that, if it can contribute, this is by leading us to rediscover neglected (environment-related) aspects in classic texts and to develop continental themes in fruitful ways. Thus, if we can come to do continental philosophy in ways that further or transform environmental thought, then, by the same token, environmental thought will also have expanded the scope and fertility of continental philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> I draw here on Michael Zimmerman's observation that there are two chief strategies within writing on continental and environmental philosophy: (1) studying how the work of leading thinkers can be read as consistent with environmental thought; (2) applying

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themes from continental philosophy to questions arising from environmental practice and theory (Zimmerman 2004: 208).

<sup>3</sup> Vogel accepts that there are non-social-constructionist strands in continental thought, but he finds them incoherent and implausible (see note 26 to Elaine Miller's article in this issue).

<sup>4</sup> Foltz and Frodeman put 'metaphysics' in scare quotes because some of those who philosophise about nature (for example, Heidegger) do so in a way that is not straightforwardly metaphysical; see below.

<sup>5</sup> Continental thought about nature, as Foltz and Frodeman interpret it, appears similar to the earlier – and not specifically continental – tradition of natural philosophy. Arguably, the strand of continental philosophy on which I focus in this introduction – a strand running from German Romanticism through Heidegger – picks up on and continues this earlier tradition in modified form. For example, the German Romantic philosopher Schelling named one of his texts *Bruno* after the sixteenth-century natural philosopher Giordano Bruno.

<sup>6</sup> To clarify, throughout this paper I will use 'philosophy of nature' in this specific sense.

<sup>7</sup> I take metaphysics to be the project of identifying and understanding the basic features or structures of reality.

<sup>8</sup> Although I have mentioned 'organicism' as an alternative to mechanism, I do not mean to suggest that organicism is the only such alternative. For example, Heidegger's rethinking of nature as *physis* is opposed to both mechanism and organicism. Indeed, he questions whether organicism is a genuine alternative to mechanism, suggesting that the organicist view of organisms as self-making artefacts (on which, see below) prefigures the mechanistic view that the world is a vast mechanism set running by an artificer.

<sup>9</sup> Schelling makes these points while criticising what he calls Hegel's 'negative' philosophy, that is, what I have called Hegel's 'metaphysics'; see Schelling 1994: 134–35, 145.

<sup>10</sup> It may be confusing that I claim both that Heidegger's approach to *physis* is not metaphysical and that he belongs within a tradition of 'metaphysical' rethinking of nature. I locate Heidegger within this tradition because, although he is not strictly engaged in metaphysics, he nonetheless rethinks nature as *physis*, which makes his thought continuous with the German Romantic tradition of rethinking nature – and, more generally, with metaphysics insofar as it seeks to supersede 'ordinary' concepts by more fundamental ones (Derrida 1982).

<sup>11</sup> I have avoided endorsing Foltz and Frodeman's argument that continental philosophers (should) oppose scientific conceptions of nature, stressing instead the need to oppose mechanistic *metaphysical* views of nature. However, these metaphysical views sometimes inform or underlie particular scientific hypotheses and theories, in which case the latter should be reinterpreted non-mechanistically.

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