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Book Review

J. Baird Callicott, John Van Buren, and Keith Wayne Brown, *Greek Natural Philosophy: The Presocratics and their Importance for Environmental Philosophy* (San Diego: Cognella Academic Publishing, 2017), 386 pp., $93.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1516528561.

J. Baird Callicott, the first philosopher to teach an environmental ethics course, has coauthored a book returning us to the first philosophers in the Western philosophical tradition, philosophers who were environmental philosophers first. Carefully reexamining the foundations of Western philosophy's past will provide, the authors believe, a better foundation for philosophy's future. Western philosophy was originally interested primarily in questions about the underlying principles of nature. Later, Plato and Aristotle began to emphasize ethics and metaphysics. Later still, philosophy left *natural* philosophy behind as the scientific revolution produced offspring disciplines like physics, chemistry, and biology. Philosophy lost something in this transition. Callicott and his coauthors believe environmental philosophy will be better off if it reconsiders what might have been lost. The text is designed to introduce readers not only to the historical foundations underlying their disciplines but to challenge the presupposition from which most modern accounts begin: that humans are separate from the rest of nature. This cornerstone is buried deep in the Western intellectual tradition; its presence continues to colour and contour our discourse—like Marley's ghost shaking his chains behind our unexamined presuppositions.

To this end, the text: (1) delivers a clear historical exposition of developments in philosophy from Thales to Aristotle with provocative attention to etymologies that highlight the environmental dimension of key philosophical terms, still in use today; and (2) concludes with a manifesto arguing that 'the future of philosophy lies in a neo-pre-Socratic revival, a return to natural philosophy in its original meaning' (p. 294).

The bulk of the text attends to the first of these; it is a revisitation of W.K.C. Guthrie's exhaustive *A History of Greek Philosophy* series (a series of six books published by Cambridge University Press between 1962 and 1981) in a more compact form, thoughtfully refracted through the lens of environmental concern. The authors lay out the core concepts, provide historical context, and spend a great deal of time distinguishing how philosophical speculation was distinct from earlier ambient modes of thinking found in local mythological and religious traditions. The discussion includes figures often left off the plate of ancient philosophy courses: Herodotus, Xenophanes, and Theophrastus—all of whom are useful in understanding the pre-Socratic philosophers who predated them.

The authors are careful to acknowledge that much of what we know of these early thinkers comes down to us by way of Aristotle, Diogenes, and a few other authors. They describe their mode of interpretation of these ancient texts as a 'diachronic dialectic of ideas' (p. 16). In other words, we can work out what a previous philosopher thought and meant by looking at the way the successor philosopher interpreted, critiqued, or attempted to refute those earlier works. That assumption makes it possible to work backwards from the fragmentary shards of argument, compiled by later philosophers, to the views they were critiquing. This allows reasonable inferences about what was important to that previous philosopher.

One provocative, and evocative, strength of the text is the useful and never intrusive references to key etymologies. The vocabulary assigned to philosophical concepts among pre-Socratic philosophers borrows from geological and geographical metaphors—and includes the presupposition that climate, culture, and landscapes influence the thought processes of different peoples. It seems a short jump, given this context, from Thales to Aldo Leopold's thinking like a mountain. These etymologies lie below the surface of our visible vocabulary, like tectonic plates conditioning the overlying topography of current usage.

Some suggestive examples include the words *archē* and *hyle*. *Archē* seems to have its origins in notions of place, power, sovereignty, or authority. This connects notions of First Principles to the community or political context in which humans exist. For Aristotle, it is the political sphere that finally grounds and justifies human understanding, human activity, and the ethics that accompanies human activity. *Hyle*, another common term adopted by Aristotle for his discussions of physics and used to describe matter in a general sense, meant timber. It was, originally, the name used for forest or woodland.

Finally, the root of the term harmony means to join together and fasten: there is the musical sense of joining notes together, but the metaphor carries with it the notion of joinery and structure that references a fascinating etymological underlayment. Similarly, the root of *aretē* (typically translated as 'virtue') means to fit together properly. Harmony is what happens when notes in a chord fit together properly. Suggestive analogies spill out of these linguistic observations. Tables and chairs, or arguments, which fit together, with *aretē*, do not fall down. They display harmony, and the universe itself, the *kosmos*, displays a harmony in its *archē*, in its *archi*tecture. These harmonies can be known and understood by the rational capacity in humans—the function of which is to work out ratios and, thus, the ways in which numbers fit together. Justice itself for the Greeks means to be in accordance with proper measure, proper ratios, and an appropriate fit.

All of which begins to sound, suspiciously, like an integrated, biotic, community. These etymological threads, tying well-established philosophical concepts directly back to nature, are confirmed by Aristotle, who noted that 'of the first philosophers, the majority thought that the principles of all things were found only in the form of matter' (p. 72). Their search for the *archē* begins and ends in the physical world. The authors' investigation into the pre-Socratics makes it clear that philosophy was *natural* philosophy, an exploration and explication of the physical world—a world not distinct from the mind investigating it but, instead, a world that houses that mind.

A Neo-Pre-Socratic Manifesto

By grounding philosophy, metaphorically and literally, in natural philosophy the authors hope to clear the way for their central proposal: a *neo-pre-Socratic Manifesto*. In the beginning, Callicott suggests, the function of philosophy was to provide a coherent account of the origins of the cosmos, where humans came from, and how we fit into that order (p. 299).

Nothing has changed.

But during the nineteenth century, as natural philosophy fractured into separate, institutionalized departments of natural and social sciences, philosophy was whittled down into a narrowly defined discipline in its own right (p. 309) in two flavours: analytic and continental. Callicott and his coauthors hope to restore the synthesizing and, well, *grounding* role philosophy once played: putting Humpty Dumpty back together again by reuniting natural philosophy and natural science.

Of course, some scientists complain that science no longer needs philosophy—but this is wrongheaded. Empirical science is as urgently in need of philosophical reflection as it ever was. Whenever science attempts to provide origin stories or to place its discoveries into a social or political context—that is, an existential, human context—scientists inevitably come home to their mother discipline and start doing philosophy: whether they're good at it or not. Sometimes they're very good at it: witness Aldo Leopold or David Suzuki or Carl Sagan.

How to proceed? Callicott offers three suggestions (p. 336):

1) From an evolutionary point of view *humans, and everything else on this planet, share a common ancestor*. This might be one way to give us a sense of kinship with our fellow creatures (as Aldo Leopold said).
2) Darwin and Evolution can provide *a sense of wonder* 'over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise' (once again quoting Leopold). This might be a way to create some sort of new spirituality that has a ground in the wonder produced by scientific discovery.
3) We can consider the notion that ethics evolved to facilitate social organization and community.

Social and political structures remain critical to environmental progress, a component hampered by confining environmental philosophy to environmental ethics. By returning philosophy to its origins, Callicott suggests we can and should revive an environmentalist philosophy in the tradition of natural philosophy, grounded on ontological and metaphysical questions that rest squarely within the originating tradition of Western philosophy, a tradition concerned originally with understanding nature and humanity's place in it.

The Audience

In a Masters level course on environmental philosophy, this should be the first text required. It provides not only the necessary historical background but the metaphysical foundations on which the inertia of Western philosophy depended—and depends. At the undergraduate level the text could also serve as one component in an

undergraduate course on ancient philosophy. Outside the classroom, anyone involved in exploring environmental questions here in the early twenty-first century has an obligation to read this book and consider how the origins of our disciplines can help us reconnect to other disciplines and, more importantly, to the universe we inhabit.[1]

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1. I found two editorial wrinkles in the text that looked more like editorial than authorial carelessness: (1) a strange editorial glitch on page 218 where the first sentence of the first two paragraphs is repeated and (2) stranger yet, a change in font sizes on p. 308.