
Review Essay

Ideas of Nature and Their Cultural Impact: The Work of Ruth and Dieter Groh

Dieter Groh, *Schöpfung im Widerspruch: Deutungen der Natur und des Menschen von der Genesis bis zur Reformation* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), 846 pp., EUR 20.00 (approx. \$26 US), ISBN 3-518-29089-4.

Ruth Groh and Dieter Groh, *Die Außenwelt der Innenwelt: Zur Kulturgeschichte der Natur 2* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1996), 150 pp., EUR 8.99 (approx \$12 US), ISBN: 3-518-28818-0.

—*Weltbild und Naturaneignung: Zur Kulturgeschichte der Natur* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2nd edn, 1996), 176 pp., EUR 10.00 (approx \$13 US), ISBN: 3-518-28539-4.

Ideas of nature are inextricably bound to cultural contexts. While certainly many people today would agree with this general statement, its logical consequences are only seldom taken seriously. Very often in political, ethical, and religious discourses concerning nature, even in the academy, a tendency is discernible to ontologize 'nature' as a distinct entity that reveals its secrets to human beings, or as something that is independent of human conceptualizations. But if concepts of nature are bound to cultural contexts, it is difficult to maintain nature's independent existence, or, to put it correctly: nature's independent status cannot be the object of scholarly analysis. Another consequence of the contingent status of concepts of nature is that worldviews and cultural patterns of thought lead to a certain treatment of nature. Political and scientific claims for preservation and environmental behavior are also dependent on the very ideas of nature that underlie these claims. They are not self-evident but a product of cultural discourse that can perhaps not be generalized across cultures.

The discussions that pertain to these questions are, of course, complex and varied. There are extreme positions on both sides, as well as attempts to find a middle ground between them. Philosophers, scholars of religion, and cultural historians naturally will take a different position than representatives of religious traditions or people who report their own experiences with nature. Sometimes the perspectives are blurred, however, and scholars of religion introduce their own experiences into their argumentation, trying to establish a normative interpretation of what should be done about the growth of environmental threats. Thus, they not only act as scholars who interpret and analyze ongoing debates, but as citizens of modern democratic states who take a definite stance in public discourse.

Among the most critical scholars in this debate are Ruth and Dieter Groh, affiliated with the University of Konstanz (Germany). Their research into the philosophical and historical dimensions of nature discourses has significantly influenced scholarly

debate during the past twenty years. However, since their work has not yet been translated into English it has not received the attention it deserves outside the German-speaking world. This article is meant as a brief introduction to the Groh's scholarly oeuvre. I will review their earlier work first and will then turn to Dieter Groh's most recent publication (2003), which is part of an ongoing research project into interpretations of nature in Western history.

1. *A Cultural History of Nature*

The recurrent theme of Ruth and Dieter Groh's publications is the durability of traditional patterns of thought and interpretation that are based on metaphysical or religious assumptions. These patterns have always determined human engagement with nature, and they have survived the processes of modernization and secularization that have taken place during the last two hundred years. Two monographs, linked in their subtitle as 'Cultural History of Nature', trace the mutual dependence of metaphysics and environmental practice in a historical perspective from late antiquity to the present. *Weltbild und Naturaneignung (Worldview and the Appropriation of Nature [1991])* collects three articles that approach the general topic from different perspectives.

The opening chapter, 'Religiöse Wurzeln der ökologischen Krise' ('Religious Roots of the Ecological Crisis', pp. 11-91), addresses the question of why a blind belief in progress and economic growth could prevail for so long, and why a general acknowledgment of the ecological problems associated with such progress has emerged only recently, although data about these problems had been available for quite some time. The optimism of eternal progress, with its high tide in the nineteenth century, was based on the claim that through technical development the human being will be freed from the forces of nature and that exploitation of natural resources will work for the benefit of human welfare. The Grohs argue that the durability of such a belief should be explained against the background of influential philosophical and metaphysical assumptions that have characterized Western discourse since early modern times. By blending ancient and Christian concepts of nature, an anthropocentric worldview emerged that made nature an object of technical exploitation. What Dieter Groh recently has analyzed in detail as a model of nature as *economia naturae*—the belief in a harmony and teleological meaning of God's creation, as well as in the infinite and unlimited resources of nature—is well attested in the works of the great scholars of the scientific revolution. Making use of extensive analysis of historical sources, the authors convincingly argue that Copernicus, Galilei, Kepler, Newton, Harvey, Boyle, Ray, Linné, and Francis Bacon, as well as the millennialist thinkers of Puritan, Calvinist, Anglican, and Pietistic provenance, had contributed to the consolidation and dispensation of a metaphysical optimism that became a program of its own in the first half of the eighteenth century with Alexander Pope and Leibniz. The same pattern inspired the European Enlightenment and survived its crisis of the nineteenth century. 'The belief retained its fascination, although its metaphysical roots later were forgotten. It even survived the substitution of causal-mechanical explanation with alternative models of explanation in the natural sciences' (1991: 68), thus remaining important for the twentieth century. This metaphysical reconnection was the major reason why the critical implications of technical exploitation could have been neglected for such a long time.

That the evaluation of nature is utterly contingent and dependent on cultural developments is the major thesis of the second chapter: 'From the Dreadful to the Sublime Mountains: On the Emergence of Aesthetic Experience of Nature' ('Von den schrecklichen zu den erhabenen Bergen. Zur Entstehung ästhetischer Naturerfahrung', pp. 92-149). Following their thesis that 'aesthetic experience of nature is a historically originated phenomenon' (1991: 93), the authors demonstrate in a brilliant analysis how a process of 'positivizing the negative' has taken place since the sixteenth century, thus long before Rousseau experienced his 'worldly ecstasies' in the Wallis Alps. The main agents of the theological and aesthetic justification of wild nature were the Cambridge Platonists in the seventeenth century, the English physico-theologians, and subsequently the English thinkers Dennis, Addison, and Shaftesbury. Partly as a response to the scientific revolution and its opening up of the universe, these authors developed an aesthetic of the infinite, which positively reevaluated those aspects of nature that had formerly been regarded as dreadful and ugly. The Platonic-Christian philosophy of nature, as well as 'natural theology', regarded all of perceptible nature as the sensual materialization of the divine order, as the revelation of God's creation. The 'landscape eye' was a term that referred to an organ for the perception of nature, related to a metaphysical concept of nature in which every observation repeated the crucial transference from mere sensual perception to metaphysical understanding. Ideas of sublime mountains or of physical infinity paralleled God's own infinity.

As a consequence of these historical considerations, the Grohs formulate their second important thesis: 'The sensual, aesthetic perception of nature is always prefigured by ideas and mental images (*Vorstellungen*). It is ideas and mental images that generate the object of experience' (1991: 95). This is a sound argument. Applied ontologically, it demonstrates that it is not nature or some sacred dimension of reality—as some sort of entity—that provides us with descriptions and evaluations of nature, but human discourse with all its contingent developments.

Already in the second chapter, the authors engage an influential article on 'Landscape' (*Landschaft*) by Joachim Ritter (written in 1963). Ritter's work—further elaborated by his pupils Odo Marquard and Hermann Lübke—has led to the thesis that the modern humanities have the function of compensating for the predicaments of technical-industrial progress. The third chapter, then, engages 'The Origin and Function of the Compensation Thesis' ('Zur Entstehung und Funktion der Kompensationsthese'). The Grohs argue that this thesis is itself an example of the discourse that brought forth the unrealistically optimistic ideas of progress and eternal growth. Separating the cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) from the natural sciences means a marginalization of the fact that the vocabulary and the questions of natural sciences themselves are determined by cultural imagination; only if we overcome the dualism between the objective world and the world of meaning will we be able to stop the negative development of the environmental crisis. According to the Grohs, it is the (ethical and academic) responsibility of the humanities to engage the whole of the cultural dynamic in a rational mode of analysis.

Ruth and Dieter Groh continue their project of a 'Cultural History of Nature' with the publication of two further articles, published in 1996 under the title *Die Außenwelt der Innenwelt* (*The Exterior World of the Inner World*). In this volume, they elaborate their argument that 'conscious or unconscious options for certain concepts of nature and cultural dispositions in general determine the perspective and thus the mode of

appropriation and experience of nature, as well as the formulation of theories of nature' (1996: 7). Put differently: it is the inner world and its aesthetic dimensions that prefigure the way we approach the outer world. In the first chapter on 'Petrarca and the Mont Ventoux' (pp. 15-82) the authors critically assess the famous contention—established by Jacob Burckhardt in the nineteenth century and Joachim Ritter (1974) in the twentieth—that Petrarca's fourteenth-century report of his climbing the Mont Ventoux is the first document of a fully modern person who for the first time accesses and appropriates 'nature' as the product of a free and theoretical mind. In contrast to these evaluations, the Grohs argue that Petrarca's (presumably faked) report does not reveal any sort of theoretical contemplation, but is a metaphor of striving for earthly things for their own sake and should thus be interpreted vis-à-vis a personal crisis of the author. 'It is the inner world—dominated by the predispositions of medieval ethical philosophy—that determined the experience of the outer world, as well as the mode of perceiving nature' (1996: 9).

While many scholars will find this conclusion regarding the appropriation of nature in the European Middle Ages convincing, the volume's second chapter is much more controversial. Polemically entitled 'Natur als Maßstab—eine Kopfgeburt' ('Nature as Norm—a Figment of Imagination', pp. 83-146), this chapter turns to the recent claim that in order to respond to the ecological crisis we need a fundamental change of our understanding of nature. Often, this claim is paralleled by a turn from anthropocentric concepts to physio- or biocentric concepts of nature. The authors argue that even the physiocentric approaches to nature are derived from teleological models—that is, models that presume a development, goal, or end of history—as well as from an epistemic anthropocentrism. 'The epistemic anthropocentrism is absolutely unavoidable, and even physiocentrism can not escape it' (1996: 86). This becomes clear if we consider that even physiocentric approaches that fundamentally refer to nature as the final basis of normative arguments for our relation to nature have to insert an epistemic distinction between nature and the human being to avoid becoming contradictory. If the human being is regarded as a complete part of nature, as a *Naturwesen*, the double nature of the human being—namely as being part of nature and a product of culture—is blurred. 'As a consequence of this under-determination of the human being we would, for instance, have to regard the products of technical culture, including its destructive results, as products of nature: the atomic pile as product of nature! The catastrophe of Chernobyl, as well, would belong to the whole of all that exists, to nature. It would not be a technical, but a natural catastrophe' (1996: 89).

We can avoid these consequences only if we accept two arguments. First, the double nature of the human being—as product of nature on the one hand, and as capable of culture and reason on the other hand—has to be acknowledged (1996: 89). Second, nature does not give us any norm of behavior. 'The reason for this is not only that wrong and right, good and bad all are equally natural, if everything that exists emerges from nature; another reason is [...] that nature as such does not exist. Nature as such, capable of being a norm, is a figment of imagination' (1996: 91).

In a consistent philosophical argument, epistemological anthropocentrism is unavoidable. But what the Grohs also call a 'reflective practical anthropomorphism' should be strictly distinguished from any form of egotistic anthropomorphism (see 1996: 86). Only if we separate the human being epistemologically from the whole of nature can we formulate (normative) ethical arguments and claims. That 'nature' does

not talk to us directly and does not have a master plan of any sort for us should not lead us to indifference regarding the ecological crisis ('Daß die Natur *uns gegenüber gleichgültig* ist, bedeutet aber nicht, daß *sie uns gleichgültig* sein darf' [1996: 136, italics original]). But any meaningful ecological ethic presupposes an epistemological break between nature and the human being.

In sum, the two volumes that address the *Kulturgeschichte der Natur* are highly important contributions to the historicization of concepts of nature, as well as to the philosophical discussion about anthropocentrism and biocentric alternatives. Translating the five essays into English and publishing them in a single volume is a scholarly desideratum.

2. Creation in Contradiction

A few years after the *Kulturgeschichte der Natur* was published, Dieter Groh worked on a book project that addressed 'The Newton Complex: Theological Patterns of Thought in the Sciences of the Long 18th Century'. For this publication he intended to write an introduction that explained the history of negative and positive anthropology, as well as the opposition between *oeconomia naturae* and *natura lapsa* until the end of the seventeenth century. Instead of an introductory chapter of fifty pages, the result was a major book, consisting of no less than 846 pages; it was published as *Schöpfung im Widerspruch: Deutungen der Natur und des Menschen von der Genesis bis zur Reformation* (*Creation in Contradiction: Interpretations of Nature and the Human Being from the Genesis to the Reformation* [2003]). And from the preface we learn that Groh is even preparing another 'introductory' book—*Die New Science im göttlichen Weltplan* (*The New Science in the Divine Plan of the World*)—which will start with the second half of the sixteenth century and will end with Leibniz' optimistic program and Newton's influence.

Schöpfung im Widerspruch is a detailed historical analysis of the influence and development of what Groh calls 'symbolic fields'. Referring to Rolf Peter Sieferle's (1990: 11) understanding of this concept, and in contradistinction to a 'paradigm', a symbolic field is a culturally construed frame of orientation that transgresses individual terrains of knowledge (Groh 2003: 15). A symbolic field prefigures patterns of thought and styles of theories and thus forms an unquestioned basis from which the specific theories are derived. The two symbolic fields that according to Groh are of particular importance for the cultural history of nature in Europe relate to the two concepts already mentioned:

The one symbolic field refers to the idea of a harmonious economy of nature, the *oeconomia naturae*; the other one to the idea of fallen nature, *natura lapsa*. Both ideas are elementary, religious-theological, and metaphysically founded concepts of nature that can be traced back to ancient philosophy and that are based on certain interpretations of the bible. These patterns of thought are ideal-typical reconstructions, which in some epochs and contexts come very close to the real types (2003: 15).

Most generally, the idea of *natura lapsa* is connected to a negative philosophical anthropology, *oeconomia naturae* to a positive one. The interpretational framework of 'fallen nature', based on Genesis 2–3 and connected in antiquity to the concept of *mundus senescens*, that is, the 'aging world', informed major parts of Christian theology and philosophy; all evils that occurred in history could be read as signs of

the increasing decline of nature and the approaching end of the world. The symbolic field of *oeconomia naturae* can also be traced back to ancient philosophy; but in this case the tradition referring to Plato's *Timaios* or Cicero's *De natura deorum* is of paramount importance. In this tradition nature is regarded as teleologically integrated into a meaningful world. As a consequence, an understanding of God through the study of nature is possible. Since the Middle Ages, the doctrine of the 'Book of Nature' as the mirror and the revelatory image of God has become highly influential. 'From this point of view, nature obviously was not fallen or declining, but beautiful and well structured' (Groh 2003: 19-20).

The ideal-typical differentiation between those two symbolic fields is very helpful, because it allows for a better understanding and analysis of cultural patterns that have emerged in Western history, philosophy, science, and religion. After a very brief introduction (2003: 15-23), Groh traces the development and materialization of the two alternative readings of the cosmos from the biblical period to Calvinism. Special attention is given to the Christian church fathers (both in the Eastern and the Western Church), Thomas Aquinas, and the medieval chiliasm of Joachim Fiore. Regarding the Reformation period, Groh provides chapters on Erasmus of Rotterdam, Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli, and Calvin. Space does not allow reviewing these chapters in detail. Suffice it to say that Groh masterfully combines in-depth historical study and the analysis of general cultural patterns; the red thread of his referential system never gets out of sight, which makes for fascinating reading. Even if one could have used other authors and cases to demonstrate the two symbolic fields—in my view, the absence of Islam and Judaism results in a limited picture of this complex cultural development—Groh's main argument is sound and the usefulness of his interpretational key is demonstrated beyond any doubt.

In conclusion, Ruth and Dieter Groh's work belongs with the most important analyses of concepts of nature in historical perspective that have been written in the last decennia. When compared to other interpretations of nature discourses, their work is convincing due to its solid historical basis and its critical attitude toward any normative or ontological assumptions vis-à-vis nature. The continuation of Dieter Groh's last monograph is eagerly awaited.

Kocku von Stuckrad

*University of Amsterdam, Dept. of Religious Studies,
Oude Turfmarkt 147, Amsterdam, NL-1012 GC, The Netherlands
c.k.m.vonstuckrad@uva.nl*

References

Ritter, Joachim

1974 'Landschaft. Zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft' (1963), in *Subjektivität* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp): 141-63.

Sieferle, Rolf Peter

1990 *Bevölkerungswachstum und Naturhaushalt: Studien zur Naturtheorie der klassischen Ökonomie* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp).