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SPECIAL TOPIC

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE

INTRODUCTION

MARIO WENNING

The questions “what is nature?” and “how should we relate to the natural world?” are as old as - or even predate - the tradition of philosophy. As an independent field of research, environmental philosophy is still rather young. It has flourished and rapidly expanded for the last three decades, which correlates with growing public awareness of environmental crises. This rapid increase of academic focus reflects the conviction that the devastating effects of the attempt to master the planet by technological means could only be altered if we rethink what we take nature and our relationship to nature to be. Nature and ecological crises (e.g., global warming, air and water pollution, nuclear disasters) transcend political and cultural boundaries and create forms of risks, which become increasingly uncontrollable and global in proportion. It is thus only natural that comparative philosophy, itself a relatively young field of inquiry, has a unique contribution to make to environmental philosophy. Drawing on more than one methodology and more than one tradition of thought helps to create innovative, cross-cultural attempts to rethink what nature is and how humans ought to address and respond to it. The collection of essays *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, edited by J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (SUNY Press, 1989), paved the way for such a collaborative endeavor and inaugurated new field of inquiry: comparative environmental philosophy. The recent sequel *Environmental Philosophy in Asian Traditions of Thought*, edited by J. Baird Callicott and James McRae (SUNY Press, 2014), attests to the ongoing debate of this field.

WENNING, MARIO: Assistant Professor of Philosophy, University of Macau, China, Visiting Professor, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China, and Humboldt Research Fellow, University of Frankfurt, Germany. Email: mwenning@umac.mo

This special topic section of *Comparative Philosophy* aims to contribute to the ongoing attempt to rethink our relationship to nature. The essays published here for the first time present recent comparative perspectives. Those working in the field of East-West intercultural thought often turned to alternative Eastern visions of harmonious relationships between humans and nature and juxtaposed these to Western realities of a harmful exploitation of nature. The essays in this special topics section also follow the comparative trajectory. However, in contrast to many of the essays included in the volumes referred to earlier, the contributions gathered here also emphasize overlaps between Eastern and Western views of nature. They thereby open up what could be called a “post-comparative” discourse that emphasizes dialogue over juxtaposition. Rather than assuming an essentialist conception of cultural difference and unbridgeable conceptual gaps, the essays point out certain parallels in Eastern and Western discourses on nature without denying differences.

In his essay “All or Nothing”, William Franke elegantly reminds the reader of the complexity of the concept of nature in the Western and Eastern traditions of art, literature, and philosophy. The author recovers a view of nature according to which “nature is what invisibly and imperceptibly encompasses us all.” By way of an engagement with the work of François Jullien, the French Sinologist and philosopher, Franke defines nature as that which is at the heart of everything and yet escapes attempts of conceptual grasp, perhaps best symbolized by the experience of blandness idiomatic of Chinese aesthetics. In an act of transcending all necessarily finite representations, nature points to what is universal. This view of nature as all-encompassing and structurally ineffable is not entirely foreign to the Western discourse on nature, especially that of mysticism and negative theology. To undermine such stereotypes, Franke presents an alternative to the contrastive view of establishing an East-West dichotomy to which Jullien subscribes and argues for the need for thinking “in the gap between Eastern and Western cultures”.

The contribution “Anti-Nature in Nature itself” by Ryōsuke Ōhashi calls into question the opposition between nature and what is often regarded as nature’s opposite: civilization or technology. Drawing on Eastern traditions (especially Daoism and Buddhism) and Western metaphysics from Parmenides to Heidegger as well as in modern science, the author argues that what he calls “anti-nature” is not opposed to nature, but emerges out of nature itself. What is new and was not imagined by classical philosophy of nature is the acceleration and the becoming independent of anti-nature. Ōhashi exposes how modern technology increasingly conceals nature and calls for a “new thinking” which would curb human “ego-consciousness” and thereby “transform this battle of anti-nature with nature itself into a kind of a ‘playing game’.”

Changfu Xu’s article “Ecological Tension” systematically addresses the conditions for ecological problems as resulting from the conscious acknowledgment of certain forms of harmful human activity within ecospheres. He singles out population size as well as the impact of economic growth on the environment as the major contributing factors to ecological problems. Drawing on the example of China, Xu illustrates how a long tradition of minimal ecological change has been

transformed into one of maximal ecological change under the impact of global capitalism and Western civilization. He concludes that there is no once and for all solution for ecological problems; however, he also emphasizes the need to think beyond capitalism and its one-dimensional focus on GDP growth at the expense of environmental sustainability.

In his “Dionysian Biopolitics” Kristof Fenyvesi draws on the little known work by the historian of culture Karl Kerényi and his as of yet philosophically unexhausted contribution to debates on biopolitics. In his interpretation of the ancient Dionysus-cult, which was practiced in Creta, and especially in the celebration of the concept of indestructible life, *zoe*, which is distinguished from finite life, *bios*, Kerényi, the author argues, develops a promising alternative to Giorgio Agamben's politicized conception of “bare life” and Heidegger's categorical distinction of animal nature from authentic humanity.

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