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# Heidegger and the Earth Essays in Environmental Philisophy

Ladelle McWhorter

*University of Richmond*, [lmcwhort@richmond.edu](mailto:lmcwhort@richmond.edu)

Gail Stenstad

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EDITED BY LADELLE McWHORTER AND  
GAIL STENSTAD

# Heidegger and the Earth

Essays in Environmental Philosophy

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# Editors' Introduction

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LADELLE McWHORTER AND GAIL STENSTAD

Paradox is the titillating Other of all logics rooted in the law of non-contradiction. It is Other because it cannot be assimilated; it is titillating because it is transgressive. Most of us enjoy an occasional encounter with paradox the way we enjoy a good joke – rarely, however, do we take paradoxes seriously. Indeed, our enjoyment depends on our thinking's maintaining itself within the logic of non-contradiction and on our viewing the paradoxical from that perspective instead of immersing ourselves in the paradoxical on its own terms. Yet when we think with Heidegger – and especially when that thinking concerns itself with what we might loosely refer to as ecology – we find ourselves called on to think with and within the paradoxical – or, at least, what appears to be paradoxical from the perspective of the logic of non-contradiction.

When we attempt to think ecological concerns within the field of thinking opened for us by Martin Heidegger, the paradoxical unfolds at the site of the question of human action. Thinking ecologically – that is, thinking the earth in our time – means thinking death; it means thinking catastrophe; it means thinking the possibility of utter annihilation not just for human being but for all that lives on this planet and for the living planet itself. Thinking the earth in our time means thinking what presents itself as that which must not be allowed to go on, as that which must be controlled, as that which must be stopped. Such thinking seems to call for immediate action. There is no time to lose. We must work for change, seek solutions, curb appetites, reduce expectations, find cures *now*, before the problems become greater than anyone's ability to solve them – if they have not already done so. However, in the midst of this urgency, thinking ecologically, thinking Heideggerly, means rethinking the very notion of human action. It means placing in question the

typical Western managerial approach to problems, our propensity for technological intervention, our belief in human cognitive power, our commitment to a metaphysics that places active human being over and against passive nature. For it is the thoughtless deployment of these approaches and notions that has brought us to the point of ecological catastrophe in the first place. Thinking with and after Heidegger, thinking Heideggerly and ecologically, means, paradoxically, acting to place in question the acting subject, willing a displacement of our will to action; it means calling ourselves as selves to rethink our very selves, insofar as selfhood in the West is constituted as agent, as actor, as calculatively controlling ego, as knowing consciousness. Heidegger's work calls us not to rush in with quick solutions, not to act decisively to put an end to deliberation, but rather to think, to tarry with thinking unfolding itself, to release ourselves to thinking without provision or predetermined aim. Such thinking moves paradoxically, within and at the edge of the tension and the play of calculation and reflection, *logos* and *poësis*, and urgency that can yet abide in stillness.

The thinkers whose work makes up this book have felt called to think as Heidegger attempted to think. The essays presented here are responses to that call; they are attempts to take seriously what presents itself to us first of all as paradox; they are attempts to allow thinking to immerse itself in itself at the site of the very difficult question of how thinking might release itself to think the earth.

Thus, this volume unfolds itself in the region of paradox. It comprises discussions of how we as active agents might come to hold ourselves resolutely open for the occurring of non-technological, non-managerial, non-agential thought, of how it might come about that speaking, thinking, and living might occur differently, of how we might begin now to undergo the loss of our delusion of impending omnipotence and perhaps escape that delusion's nihilistic results. The conversants are not environmental experts armed with information about particular crises or the consequences of particular techniques. They are philosophers struggling to open thinking towards paths that will affirm rather than destroy the earth.

Part I, 'Thinking Earth,' opens with Ladelle McWhorter's essay, 'Guilt as Management Technology: A Call to Heideggerian Reflection,' which gives an overview of Heidegger's thinking on technology and discusses Heidegger's call for reflection as opposed to instrumental or calculative thinking about the earth. It carefully distinguishes reflection, in Heidegger's sense, from moral stock taking or ethical judgment. In

fact, it suggests that moral discourse and practice are themselves forms of technology, sets of techniques for maintaining control over self and other. As such, morality shows itself as a danger, as part of the technological, calculative, managerial thinking that currently endangers the earth itself. The essay closes with a kind of warning: if it is the case that morality is part of technological discourse and practice rather than a separable discourse whose purpose is critique, then moral condemnation and moral guilt are reinstatations of the calculative. Thus our tendency to feel guilty about our treatment of the earth is not a change of heart but is, rather, a perpetuation of human domination.

In Part I's second essay, 'Heidegger and Ecology,' Hanspeter Padruitt describes his experience of coming to see connections between Heidegger's thought and ecological thinking. He examines several of Heidegger's most fundamental notions, from 'coming-forth holding-in-reserve' ('aus einer zuvorkommenden zurückhaltung her') to 'Gestell,' in their relation to ecology. He then examines current ecological thinking from a Heideggerian perspective, revealing some of the ways in which ecological thinking undercuts itself or falls back into a language of mastery or control, a language in which ecology's own most significant insights are in danger of being lost. Finally, he addresses a number of possible criticisms of Heidegger's ecological thinking.

In 'Earth-Thinking and Transformation,' Kenneth Maly shows us ways in which Heideggerian reflection on the fact of our being earth-dwellers can be transformative of our thinking at its very core and therefore transformative of our world. Maly believes that our culture's insistence on a divorce between rationality and other ways of thinking and knowing has resulted in an impoverishment of our being and a destructive distancing from the earth that gives rise to, shelters, and sustains us. When we take ourselves and the earth as fixed entities to be comprehended by rational observation and theoretical constructs, we lose sight of the earth and being-human as process, as forever unfixed, as changing, growing, outgrowing, as living and therefore dying. It is only when we begin to think human being and earth as unfixed, as always undergoing transformation in a living unfolding of our/its being, that a new, less destructive understanding of humanity-in/on-earth can come into being, with the possibility of a way of living that unfolds within the dynamic paradox of relatedness-as-such. And such understanding, Maly would argue, is absolutely necessary if we are to avoid destroying the earth.

Given, then, that Maly's claim is that we need to move underneath

traditional Western modes of thought – modes of thought that force us to understand beings as static and unchangeable objects rather than as dynamic processes emerging and unfolding through time – it would be inappropriate for his essay to adhere to the norms of Western scholarship. Maly is true to his work. He presents us not with a carefully argued position but with a movement of thinking. The essay begins within Western rationality and moves in a four-stage process towards a different kind of thinking, one that he calls ‘earth-deep-thinking,’ a thinking that reimages the earth, because, as he says, our images of the earth make us who and what we are. To stay with Maly through his essay, while no easy task for readers schooled in the argumentative and interpretive techniques characteristic of most North American philosophy, is to move with him into this other thinking that he explores and advocates.

Gail Stenstad’s response to and elaboration on Maly, ‘Singing the Earth,’ takes us farther along two of the paths that Maly’s thinking indicates: earth as dark (the self-concealing that is both sheltering and frightening) and our longing to be with the earth. She suggests that it is our be-longing to the earth that is at stake. If, when we fear the dark, our desire or longing moves away from what is earthy, we live disconnected from the earth, with disastrous consequences. However, if we allow ourselves to be moved by and with the revealing *and* concealing of earth and earthy things, our longing is also our be-longing. This be-longing will play itself out in – as Heidegger’s thinking hints – our language (not just words but also song, dance, art, buildings, ritual) and our ways of dwelling.

In ‘Call of the Earth: Endowment and (Delayed) Response,’ Robert Mugerauer undertakes to go more deeply into Heidegger’s radical thinking of our situation by engaging it with Jean-Luc Marion’s work on givenness. Marion’s thinking undermines the notion of subjectivity, redefining us as ‘the gifted,’ those to whom the given is given. The given, in turn, is such only in this giving. A discussion of the range of ways in which the play of giving–given–gifted may emerge, whether in ‘natural visibles’ or in works of art, opens the question of how the earth itself may be given. Here, Mugerauer turns to Heidegger’s recalling the ancient thought of *phusis*, the coming forth of what comes of itself, beyond our control (though not completely). The insight that emerges here is that there is much, much more to earth and to us as those to whom it is given than any reductive approach, whether scientific or philosophical, can encompass. Why? Because ‘givenness hap-

pens without why,' and it is only in encountering things without *why* that we can begin to respond to the call of earth, here and now, in our own places.

Opening Part II of the anthology, 'Animals and the World,' is Tom Greaves's contribution, 'The Word's Silent Spring: Heidegger and Herder on Animality and the Origin of Language.' His is the first of three essays that take up the question of animality in Heidegger's work. Greaves begins by asking: What is the character of the abyssal difference between human and animal that Heidegger speaks of? Is this an unfortunate affirmation of a metaphysics that Heidegger elsewhere works hard to dismantle, or can we understand it in some other way? With close attention to Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*, his treatment of Herder's *Treatise on the Origin of Language* in his 1939 seminar, and *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Greaves argues for an alternative and far more ecologically significant interpretation. The abyssal difference is not a posited distinction between human and animal, he concludes, but rather a 'de-cision,' a 'cutting,' a way of hearing the silent language of nature that frees each kind of being into its own element while still allowing all to belong together in their respective environments.

Continuing this discussion of animality, Dennis Skocz approaches the question of how we might be with non-human animals in his essay 'Environmental Management: In the "Age of the World Picture,"' by way of a careful examination of the uses and risks of geographic information systems (GISs). Skocz views GISs as a sophisticated means of seemingly unlimited whole-earth representation with all the dangers Heidegger views as attendant to representative thinking magnified by its capacity for totalization. It is especially crucial to keep these risks in mind, Skocz insists, when GIS is used – as it so often is – to learn about non-human animals' behaviour in their own habitats in order to protect them from technological encroachment. A big danger is that a GIS-generated understanding of the animal 'world' (or 'paraworld,' as Skocz terms it, in contrast to the non-captivating world of the human being) diverges significantly from non-human animal experience. GIS is a visual information technology that de-emphasizes auditory and olfactory experience, for example, and it is not inherently alert to animal instinct or perception of threat. But because GIS is so powerful a tool and so comprehensive, even very well-intentioned users may not only fail to notice significant aspects of animal habitat and behaviour but also fail to notice their own failure to notice. This observation allows Skocz to

engage in a complex and fruitful analysis of Heidegger's concepts of readiness- and presence-to-hand. Captivated by its environment, the non-human animal is simply unable to take anything as present-to-hand. While the modern human tendency to exalt presence-to-hand as a privileged mode of knowing has resulted in serious damage to our world, it also, Skocz persuasively argues, enables an important kind of freedom from our environment, including from the tools we use. Therefore, though the danger is great, we do not have to be captivated by GIS; we can 'presentify' it as a tool. Furthermore, our freedom from the elements of our ready-to-hand world enables us to transpose ourselves onto the paraworld of the non-human animal and to act as what Skocz calls fiduciaries for non-human animals in our efforts to protect them from threats they cannot perceive or instinctually counter.

Finally, in 'Humanity as Shepherd of Being: Heidegger's Philosophy and the Animal Other,' Donald Turner takes up the question of whether Heidegger's work can constitute any sort of practical ethics, given that he refuses the frameworks and aims common in traditional ethical theory. In particular, Turner is concerned with the question of how we might live with non-human animals, and he argues that Heidegger's work can lead in directions (or allow for 'creative gestures') that Heidegger himself did not and perhaps would not have followed out. While Heidegger's emphasis on language seems to exclude virtually all non-human animals from ethical consideration, Turner finds that Heidegger's discussion of non-human animals as 'world-poor' (rather than world-less) and his use of the phrase 'shepherd of being' open towards a possibility for what Heidegger calls 'transposition,' a way of being with non-human animals that is neither calculative and grasping nor fundamentally indifferent – in short, a way of knowing and caring without mastery or exploitation. Along the way Turner offers a very clear discussion of Heidegger's characterization of the bee as captivated by the flower, of human freedom in contrast to this captivity, and of the 'as such' structure of human perception – so often disparaged as the foundation of claims to objectivity – as what is first of all freeing in the human encounter with the world, and he provides a thought-provoking explication of some of Heidegger's most important passages on non-human animals.

With the opening of Part III, 'Poësis and Dwelling,' we shift focus a bit. While essays in Parts I and II were concerned in various ways with language and its relation to earth-thinking, these final contributions make that theme central. In 'The Path of a Thinking, Poeticizing Build-



ing: 'The Strange Uncanniness of Human Being on Earth,' Steven Davis examines in great detail Heidegger's analysis of Sophocles' 'Ode on Human Being' from *Antigone*, giving particular attention to the notion that human being is not-at-home on earth. With great care Davis sets out the tensions Heidegger sees in the being of human being. Then he uses the elaboration of those tensions to situate the question of whether it is possible for human being to be itself in its uncanniness without also being violent.

Remmon E. Barbaza continues the discussion of dwelling with his essay 'There Where Nothing Happens: The Poetry of Space in Heidegger and Arellano.' In a meditation before a painting by Filipino artist Juan Arellano, *Cloudy Day*, Barbaza considers the relationship between Heidegger's notion of dwelling and the creating of works of art. Heidegger calls us to dwell poetically, Barbaza writes, which means, among other things, to be attuned to the nothing that arises with being. In Arellano's painting, Barbaza finds such an attunement. Arellano gives voice to the nothing in the bringing-forth of *phusis*, and thus he participates in that bringing-forth even as he depicts human habitation, and habit, in the midst of what is often called nature. Barbaza concludes with a discussion of poetic measuring (so different from the objectifying measuring of modern technology), which measures nearness without erasing distance, and which takes the measure of human habitude in nothingness.

These themes of habitation and nearness carry into Thomas Davis's essay, 'Meeting Place,' which begins with the question of whether one might 'be invited to neighbour the earth,' to come to belong with the earth as companion. In order to open this question more fully, Davis draws us through a meditation on two texts: Wendell Berry's story of his encounter with a hawk in *Home Economics*, and Heidegger's memory of the silent dialogue between an oak and a country path in *Der Feldweg*. Through the course of his meditation, Davis brings us to an awareness of our mortal being as an essential openness to the unfamiliar, as the very possibility of being 'next-to,' or neighbouring. And he brings us to a new sense of the earth as the unfamiliar, the unknowable, even as death is unknowable. This is an essay about difference, boundaries, and respectful acknowledgment of otherness; but more than that, it is an essay about the belonging-together, the 'companioning,' that is only possible in the acknowledgment of essential difference. Davis's essay stands in opposition to technological thinking, which always and everywhere encounters nothing but man, nothing but itself. 'Meeting

Place' speaks to difference and to the awe that is possible only within the opening wherein difference is allowed to occur.

Ladelle McWhorter's startling realization that most of us are quite ignorant of the 'first thing about dwelling' – what we can eat right here in this place – leads to a conversation with Gail Stenstad about eating and the food we eat. The conversation in 'Eating *Ereignis*, or: Conversation on a Suburban Lawn' quickly becomes a reflection on the urgency of thinking about this matter at a time in which what is so often referred to as 'our food supply' comes more and more under the control of a few large megacorporations that care nothing for the earth or its people. But what about this 'our,' this 'we'? Who or what is that? And how is it that it is endangered in the current move towards total control, not just over food but over 'us'? Del and Gail engage these questions in the space opened up by Heidegger, uncovering historical and contemporary roots of our ignorance, and following thinking towards the 'first thing beyond the first thing,' the mystery of dynamic relationality within which we move, think, and – yes – eat. The simple act of eating a weed becomes a radical move that reawakens the now thoughtful eater to the mystery of the rising and concealing we call 'earth,' opening the possibility of first inhabiting our place and then dwelling on this earth, a possibility that can emerge only as we begin to imagine and think it.

In 'Down-to-Earth Mystery,' Gail Stenstad takes up the question of how we can be empowered in a situation in which our thinking and actions seem futile, compelling us to witness helplessly the destruction of earth and world. Coming to grips with the ungrounding of thinking opened up in Heidegger's *Contributions to Philosophy* brings an awareness of the an-archic character of thinking, in which all the traditional dualistic touchstones and fixations (such as objectivity, territoriality, and in general all theoretical aims) fall aside. This is a way to begin to open up the depths of what Heidegger means by releasement towards things, enabling the openness to mystery that embodies in us the groundless grounding from which we are then empowered to respond to the situation in which we actually find ourselves. This is no abstraction, nor yet wordplay. It is this an-archic thinking that can, for example, enable environmental philosophers and other concerned people to work or play with the best insights of any theory, fostering action without the hindrance of the useless expectation of uniform agreement. So there is the possibility of practical empowerment. But even if we see no clearly apparent results of that kind, going deeper yet into the matter awakens us to the magnetic quality of genuine thinking. 'We are the pointers,' Heidegger says. Releasing the old expectations, opening to

mystery without aiming to resolve it, responding to things in the ongoing ungrounded dance of dynamic relationality, enables us first of all to be who we are. Only then may we begin to imagine what it is to dwell on this earth, and act accordingly.

Though each essayist presents his or her thinking as it has arisen out of the texts of Martin Heidegger, as this brief overview surely makes clear, the thoughts a reader will encounter here are diverse and at points conflicting. However, the essayists' differences in many cases actually grow out of a common sense – namely, a sense of urgency born of the knowledge that for many regions of the earth and for many of the beings within them, time is running out. The book itself, including its conflicting assertions, is the embodiment of a kind of anxiety and a kind of care. This book is a beginning, an opening, an attempt, and, we hope, in the best Nietzschean sense of the word, a temptation for further thought.

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