

Understanding the Plurality of Nature: A Neo-Spinozist Response to the Critical Naturalism Manifesto

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Abstract

The prior issue of *Krisis* (42:1) published *Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto*, with the aim to instigate a debate of the issues raised in this manifesto – the necessary re-thinking of the role (and the concept) of nature in critical theory in relation to questions of ecology, health, and inequality. Since *Krisis* considers itself a place for philosophical debates that take contemporary struggles as starting point, it issued an open call and solicited responses to the manifesto. This is one of the sixteen selected responses, which augment, specify, or question the assumptions and arguments of the manifesto.

Keywords

Critical naturalism, Nature, Plurality, Metaphysics, Spinoza, Deleuze

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I. Naturalizing the Social and the Political

Critical theories set themselves apart from essentialist and determinist conceptions of nature for good emancipatory reasons, but this sceptical character of critique has also led to a deep rejection of nature, and a forgetfulness of nature that we can no longer afford. Rather, we should better understand the extent to which we are part of nature, and the extent to which nature forms the irreducible frame of the plural modes of existence. This is the task facing critical theories today, and in order not to get lost in various normative constrictions, they have to keep looking at the whole of nature and to engage in metaphysical work on concepts of nature. Even if most critical theories have a difficult relationship with ontology and metaphysics, every form of critical theory is subject to ontological presumptions which range from the individual as the first unit of society, to different forms of connections, and the idea of a foundational whole nature around it.

Critical theories try to avoid any reference to nature because nature seems to be a determinative source of normativity. Yet, even if norms emerge in the societal context, there is a general precondition of norms that has to do with orders established in nature, i.e. with nature as an order that forms the authoritative precondition in the background of norms (Daston 2018). To challenge this normative invocation of nature, we need to be clear that normative orders are orders of human reason, and that nature itself is not a fixed order but a dynamic and transitive system which can exhibit a multiplicity of phenomena beyond norms.

Today we distinctly see that the social and the political are not to be understood by regional ontologies, but stand in a relationship of entanglement with all of nature. Not only in Marx, but already in Locke, Hobbes, Smith, and also in Rousseau, it can be seen clearly that the developments of capitalism, liberalism, and bourgeois society go along with making nature available. Especially in political philosophy and the history of political ideas, we are dealing with multiple forms of the naturalization of man and the humanization of nature. Marx even points out that the human aspect of nature only becomes clear in society, which is a metabolism of human beings with nature, and that nature is the bond that ties people together (Saito 2022).

Human freedom can therefore not be achieved against nature, but only within nature, and that's why we have to see nature in metaphysical models of the plurality of human life. Therefore, we must start from a nature that is not presupposed as a transcendent ground, but rather which is understood as an immanent whole of constant modification and plural individuation. In this direction I would like to refer to Spinoza's *Ethica* of 1677, and his metaphysical model of immanence, that allows us to recognize nature as the infinite and unconditional framework of the unity and multiplicity of human life forms (Andermann 2020).

II. Critical Naturalism with Spinoza and Deleuze

Spinoza presents a metaphysical model of whole nature and explains individuation from its immanent relations. This approach is useful for critical naturalism because it presents a principle of immanent causality by which the contingent constitution of individuals in nature can be described. Spinoza commences with the elementary dimensions of reality and a definition of an essence (*essentia*) that is the cause and condition of itself and involves its own existence (*existentia*). Starting with the principle of *causa sui*, he places an immanent self-cause, i.e. a self-generating distinction, at the forefront for building the emergence of his system. Against the background of this conception of immanence, Spinoza can interpret the entire existence as constituted by its own conditions and as a form of immanent causality (*causa immanens*). His assumption of a fundamental unity of a single substance is important in order to understand nature in its immanence, and to derive the individuation of singular things from it. For Spinoza, nature is a power in the sense of *potentia*, i.e. an immanent power that is inherent in natural things and through which they arrive at their own respective form of expression. It is creating nature (*natura naturans*), while the modes expressed through it are created nature (*natura naturata*). With the distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, Spinoza marks his conception of a dynamic world that is changeable in different forms. He reveals a concept of nature as *naturare*, which shows the active and dynamic character of a nature in which individuals unfold in dependence upon external influences.

Gilles Deleuze outlines this contingent individuation in nature and says that the expression of nature in manifold modes does not mean that they are only appearances (of God or of ideas). It is rather that this expression shows the participation of these modes in nature, they are not appearances in the sense of representations of a superior idea, but expressions of the substance

that they themselves are. Individuals are thus expressions of the substance and thus of nature, and nature shows itself to be a multiplicity of manifold expressions down to its deepest levels (Deleuze 1990). In his ontological model of substance, attributes, and modes, the modes constitute a point of transition from the substance of the whole nature to individual things. Modes are described by Spinoza as affections of substance, and defining every single entity in this way, he emphasizes the ontological power of affections. Only by affections can modes come to be individuated as singular things within the whole nature. The derivations of the verb *afficio* play a crucial role here, and Spinoza makes full use of the broad semantic field of the concept of affects. Affections are not only ontological forces but also important in the epistemological context, since they constitute the conditions of the movement and rest of bodies, whose affection gives rise to the ideas of the intellect. What we see is a heteronomy that determines every individual body and mind, and the multiplicity of external affections, of affecting and being affected, is a necessary principle of the individual's self-preservation in nature. The differential concatenation of affections transcends individuals and connects them in the transindividual context of society and in the whole of nature. Defining individuals as multiple affections of substance (or nature) allows opening up possibilities of individuation against a unification in essential determinations. In this immanent interpretation, nature is a plurality of expressions which implies that different individuals are not seen as right or wrong, but as gradual capacities to affect and be affected. This conception of nature is a resource for critical naturalism, and if it is true that nature has returned to our present, we must understand ourselves as a dynamic part of it and adapt to it without losing our freedom.

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Biography

Kerstin Andermann works as a lecturer in philosophy at Leipzig University in Germany. Historically, her research focuses on the early modern period (esp. Spinoza) and the philosophy of the 19th to 21st century. Systematically, her focus is on questions of social philosophy, political philosophy, cultural philosophy and ethics in connection with metaphysical (ontological) foundations. She has published a book on Spinoza "Die Macht der Affekte. Spinozas Theorie immanenter Individuation" in 2020 and most recently different papers in context of Spinoza, Foucault and Deleuze on affects, power, transindividuality, immanent ethics, philosophy of difference as well as philosophical anthropology.