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The denial of nature: environmental philosophy in the era of global capitalism

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The denial of nature: environmental philosophy in the era of global capitalism

Abstract

Book review of: The denial of nature: environmental philosophy in the era of global capitalism, by Arne Johan Vetlesen, London, Routledge, 2015, xi + 223 pp., ISBN: 9780415724746 (hardback), 9781315848273 (paperback)

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Arne Johan Vetlesen (2015) *The denial of nature: environmental philosophy in the era of global capitalism* (London: Routledge) xi + 223 pp. ISBN 9780415724746 cloth, 9781315848273 paper.

This book argues for a paradigm shift in environmental philosophy. Arne Johan Vetlesen, who is a Norwegian ethicist, asserts that environmental philosophy is implicated in the pathologies it otherwise seeks to challenge. In order to become part of the proverbial solution, rather than the problem, Vetlesen argues for an experience-based philosophy predicated on concrete engagements with the biophysical world.

The denial of nature is comprised of four long, dense yet readable chapters sandwiched between an introduction and a conclusion. Vetlesen's starting point is the fact that environmental philosophy has grown in size and prominence during a period when the natural world has lost ever more of its naturalness due to human activities. One might surmise that this simply reflects the limited role that philosophy today plays in shaping public values. But Vetlesen identifies a more fundamental problem: according to him, environmental philosophy has been pursued in the same intellectual and abstract manner as most other areas of Western philosophy. This serves to hold 'real nature' at a distance and presumes that reasoning about nature's value can, in the end, change hearts and minds. For Vetlesen it thereby reproduces the society-nature dualism entrenched in the wider culture, while ignoring the massive psychological investment modern people have in a capitalist way of life that systematically separates most of us from sustained contact with a biophysical world we are, nonetheless, utterly dependent on. What is needed, he argues, is a truly radical approach to environmental philosophy that redefines the intellectual and affective basis on which philosophising occurs.

In chapter I Vetlesen describes the character of society-nature relations with reference to Theresa Brennan's books *Exhausting modernity* (2000) and *Globalization and its Terrors* (2003). Brennan's neo-Marxist approach blends political economy with psychoanalytical theory. Vetlesen commends her attempt to show that the separations and abstractions that capitalism creates have a crucial psychic element: they penetrate into people's sense of self, not least by institutionalising the notion of 'individuals' separate from 'society' and

'environment'. Technology is a key part of this since it mediates people's physical relations with soils, minerals, animals and much more besides.

In chapter two – entitled 'Nature deficit in critical theory' – Vetlesen takes the Frankfurt School to task for its persistent anthropocentrism and limited attempt to explore the ecologically destructive character of modern capitalist societies. The School's nature denial is taken as symptomatic of critical social theory more widely. Chapter three then considers how environmental philosophy has sought to acknowledge and challenge this anti-ecocentrism. Vetlesen focuses on the well-known ethicists Paul Taylor, J. Baird Callicott, and Holmes Rolston III. But he also offers an appreciative discussion of Hans Jonas's philosophy of being (Jonas is not usually discussed by Anglophone environmental philosophers). According to the Vetlesen, Jonas's ideas provide a vital bridge between the ecocentric philosophy of Taylor, Callicott and Rolston and the experience-based ecocentric ethics that we desperately need to institutionalise and normalise worldwide. This is because Jonas pushes us to consider the world not in intellectual terms but in practical terms, as organisms existing *in nature* who are themselves *of nature*.

A major everyday barrier to such practical engagement is technology. In a capitalist world technologies are ubiquitous and ever changing. They paradoxically connect us with nature even as they distance us from it. Vetlesen turns to another post-war German philosopher – Gunther Anders – to help readers appreciate the psychic implications of these technologies. As the decades pass, capitalist technology institutes an ever-more insidious devaluation of nature, causing irreversible biophysical loss and change. Towards the end of the chapter, taking indigenous cosmologies and the example of animals, Vetlesen points towards an experiential environmental ethic that involves people in a new sense of world and of self. In the conclusion, partly inspired by the writings of Freya Matthews, Vetlesen advocates 'panpsychism'. This acknowledges the psychic dimension of *all* physical things and processes. For Vetlesen it is only achievable by immersion in life's buzzing, blooming confusion and present-day neoliberal capitalism is inimical to that. This means that conventional philosophical reasoning is neither necessary nor sufficient to help change the world. On the contrary, only a revolution in our way of life will allow panpsychism to strike us as more than a fanciful philosophical proposition.

As a non-philosopher I found the book to be stimulating. It surveys a lot of intellectual territory with clarity and presents an interesting plenary argument. Though some might find his case too derivative of others' writings, Vetlesen's book made me ponder whether the majority of Western social science and humanistic scholarship exists in an 'iron cage' it is powerless to escape. Though we academics believe 'academic freedom' is something real and valuable, Vetlesen implies that un-freedom reigns insofar as environmental philosophy internalises its wider socio-environmental context 'all the way down'. It is interesting to consider, in the context of this journal, just how 'independent' critical realist thinking is in its various permutations.

This said, there are a number of obvious problems that arise with Vetlesen's call for a paradigm shift in environmental philosophy. First, on what basis does his argument for a less academic and abstract philosophy arise? Is he himself 'experienced' in his positive sense of that term? I ask because the book's style is typically philosophical: long chapters pay homage to key thinkers and variously praise or criticise their thinking *en route* to Vetlesen's preferred version of an ecocentric ethic. This leaves one wondering if the author is using the resources of the 'old' paradigm to argue for a new one; there's certainly nothing alternative about the mode of argumentation. Secondly, the author aside, what potentialities exist in the contemporary world to suggest that Vetlesen's thesis is anything more than a case of wishful thinking? The book stays clear of discussing what immanent forces might foster a widespread protest against present-day 'ecocide'. The book's own argument suggests that an anthropocentric ethics is now so widespread globally that experience-based alternatives to it are increasingly sparse and lack the power and visibility to mount a challenge. Indeed, the book's final page laments the 'vicious cycle' we are collectively stuck in. The result is that *The denial of nature* is unable to do more than enjoin its readers to change, as if the power of argument could counteract the lack of historical conditions conducive to its realisation. Vetlesen knows that injunctions are not nearly enough, and so his book takes on some of the melancholy we associated with Adorno's post-war conclusion that that solutions may not exist for systemic problems.

In sum, this is an engaging book that is a pleasure to read. But I am not sure it takes environmental ethics in quite the new directions Vetlesen wants to travel.

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