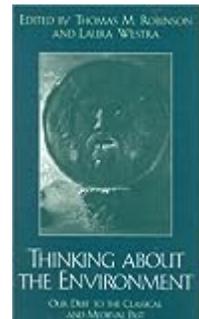




Thomas M. Robinson, Laura Westra, eds. *Thinking about the Environment: Our Debt to the Classical and Medieval Past.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002. xii + 226 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0420-0.



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Back to the Roots of Environmental Thought

This volume contains sixteen articles that examine aspects of ancient and medieval philosophy, mythology, religion, and law embodying conceptions of the natural environment. It is the outcome of a conference held in Italy, and it has some of the problems of focus that one expects in a proceedings collection, but nevertheless holds together as a series of views on themes of ancient and medieval environmental thought. It is a useful sequel to the editors' previous collection, *The Greeks and the Environment* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), which was more tightly focused on the major Greek philosophers, particularly Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus. Students of the history of environmental ideas will be grateful for this series of reminders, many of them provocative, of the early roots of their growing inquiry.

Three of the articles are in Italian, and these are provided with brief summaries in English. The inclusion of notes and/or bibliography was left up to the individual authors; some usefully give both, but others unfortunately provide neither. There is no index, and no general bibliography. Within these limitations, however, it remains a useful volume.

In the opening essay, Michael W. Herren of York University traces the contest between the ideas of nature and culture through Mesopotamian and Greek myths, and concludes that most of the points were won by culture, a victory that resounds in later western thought. There is no doubt of the patriarchal cast of the impulse to civilization in these cultures, which Herren reemphasizes, and which is reflected in much of this material. I think, however, that he fails sufficiently to recognize the recurring theme of the woman, or female deity, as civilizing agent, from the harlot who ensnared Enkidu to Eve and Pandora.

Hideya Yamakawa (St. Andrew's University, Osaka) offers an analysis, which he derives from Buddhist insights, of Greek philosophy's conception of the environment. He elucidates the problem of reconciling Buddhist realizations of oneness and nothingness with the ubiquitous insistence of the Greeks on discussing the world as a series of mutually exclusive opposites. It is undoubtedly unfair to his graceful argument, which I do not have space to abstract, to say that his conclusion awards a victory to Buddhist thought.

Any full treatment of Greek environmental philosophy needs to seek an understanding of the Sicilian genius, Empedocles, and this is exactly what Giovanni Caserto of the University of Naples does in his offering. The vision of a world composed of elements and passing through changes brought about by the opposing forces of Strife and Love is a compelling one. Caserto pointedly warns of the dangers of strife (war, greed, egotism, etc.) that lead toward environmental annihilation. But Empedocles feared both repulsion and attraction, since love without balance would end in a cosmos without diversity or change.

Helen Karabatzaki (University of Ioannina) covers three major Hellenistic philosophies: Epicureanism, Skepticism, and Stoicism. Surprisingly, she sees the Epicureans as giving nature an inherent worth and advising a lifestyle that would be environmentally undemanding. The skeptics, she avers, criticized anthropocentrism. But the Stoics receive her best critique: while they maintained that there is no covenant of justice between humans and other animals, they nonetheless had an ecological stance that can be defended, and their ethics included reconciling the standard of living with nature.

One of the earliest ecological laws with a geographical context is contained in an Athenian inscription interpreted by Livio Rossetti (University of Perugia). Dating to 430 B.C.E., it forbids putting tannery wastes into the Ilissus River near the temple of Heracles. Rossetti calls it the most ancient ecological decree, which is an exaggeration. While not the first environmental prohibition per se—Hesiod in 700 B.C.E. forbade pollution of streams with human waste and Solon's laws in 594 included a provision on wolf hunting—it is deserving of the attention given here. Unfortunately, Rossetti gives Italian and English translations but does not provide the original Greek text.

Lorina Quartarone (University of Montana) contributes a delightful essay, "Roman Forests, Vergilian Trees: Our Ambiguous Relationship with Nature," reminding us of the Roman reverence for ancient trees and sacred groves. In this context, heedless utilitarian use was considered to entail disenchantment and violation of the natural world.

The advent of Christianity and the end of the ancient world is introduced by Madonna Adams (Caldwell College) in a study of Augustine's attitudes to the natural environment, which fall within his major paradigm, the *ordo amoris* (Order of Love). While human life is superior to other animal life and there are no common rights

between us and beasts or trees analogous with those between human beings, well-ordered love would forbid the use of the environment to satisfy human greed, the desire for luxury, and the production of waste. In an otherwise exemplary essay, I missed reference to the seminal study of Augustine's environmental thought by Paul Santmire (*The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, pp. 55-73).

Polish medieval perceptions of nature are investigated by Teresa Kwiatowska (University of Mexico) in an article that pays close attention to linguistic analysis. Beyond that, she clearly reveals the ties of poets and scholars to the splendor of the Polish landscape.

Rosemary Thee Morewedge (SUNY at Binghamton) offers an exploration of ideas of nature in the courtly epic of the search for the Holy Grail, *Parzival*. While careful to avoid the dangers of natural theology, Wolfram von Eschenbach was enchanted by nature and insisted that there is a Book of Nature, open to all people to read, alongside the biblical Word of God. It is this second book that guides Parzival in finding the use of the Holy Grail, a stone that embodies the presence of God in nature, but operates only through human understanding.

An Aristotelian scholar, Laura Westra (University of Windsor), one of the editors, offers an article exploring the relationship of natural law and the laws of nature in Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, and the application of both to public policy in the modern world. Starting with the paradox that on the one hand, Aristotle doubts that a state with a population of as many as a hundred thousand people will be able to inculcate a habit of obedience to law, and on the other hand there are areas of law today that must be global in order to be effective, since they cannot be entrusted to individual nation-states, Westra nonetheless argues that ancient and medieval thought are relevant to the modern world, and that this relevance consists in the application of natural laws, including the principle that it is wrong to "prevent the actualization of natural entities, according to their own natural unfolding" (p. 129). Westra leaves implicit the conclusions to be drawn from these principles, but I fear they are controversial in the context of contemporary political discourse, since natural entities include such things as embryos, stem cells, and disease organisms.

In a brief but well-researched historical article, Valentina Vincenti (her biography is unaccountably missing from the list of contributors) describes the measures undertaken by the city of Perugia from the twelfth

through the sixteenth centuries to protect the important Lake Trasimene by regulating fishing and hunting. These resulted from a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of what would today be called the ecology of the area.

Medieval Islam is represented by two articles; the first is by Parviz Morewedge (Binghamton University), who takes a psychological view that attributes to Islam the view of nature as a manifestation of the “extended self” (p. 143). He maintains that Islam can support the monistic view that nature is an emanation of God, and therefore is good, and criticizes Seyyed Hossein Nasr for holding a dualistic view in which evil is a dimension of nature opposed to a monotheistic deity. Morewedge’s view has affinities with some strains of mysticism and those Islamic philosophers who were influenced by the Greek naturalistic tradition, and it is admittedly a minority viewpoint in theology, but it avoids positing an essential alienation between self and nature.

The second article on Islamic culture is a study of nature in the poetry of Rumi by Lynda Clarke (Concordian University). The article is based in the main on his long didactic poem, the *Masnavi*. Rumi denies that there are any mediating laws between God and nature, while affirming that the universe is alive as a constant creation of God. Nature continually glorifies God—something “Man” (sic) may fail at times to do. *Eros* (mutual attraction) animates the universe and produces the activity of all creatures. Therefore (to simplify Clarke’s elegant exposition), while the value of nature derives from humanity, humans experience an *eros* toward nature that is analogous with what E. O. Wilson calls *biophilia*.

There are similarly two articles on medieval Judaism. Edward Halper (University of Georgia) compares the commentaries of Maimonides and Nachmanides on the commandment against taking a mother bird from the nest together with her young or eggs (Deuteronomy 22:6-7). Instead the mother bird must be sent away. What is the reason for this commandment? Jewish philosophers maintain that it is right to ask such a question. Halper gives us a delightful excursion into exegesis. If one maintains that the reason is to avoid harm or suffering to the bird, does that not imply that the bird (and therefore nature) has an intrinsic value? But all commandments are intended to benefit mankind. Maimonides holds, therefore, that the purpose of the commandment is to limit human greed and teach sensitivity to the suffering of others, animal or human. Nachmanides, however, believes that the purpose of the commandment is to prohibit act-

ing so as to destroy a species, which would be to negate the work of God. “Thus,” Halper concludes, “their understandings of the commandment to send away the mother bird differ significantly, but both agree that it calls for some type of respect for the environment” (p. 199).

The second Jewish article is “The Third and Fifth Day of Creation Versus the Timeless Now” by Emilie Kutash (Boston Colloquium for History and Philosophy of Science), which compares the narrative of creation in *Genesis* to Plato’s dialogue of creation in the *Timaeus*. The Platonic universe is renewed cyclically, so that no matter what humans do, it will be restored in the eternal recurrence of perfection“ (p. 210). But the Jewish God creates only once, and places upon mankind a series of responsibilities for the preservation of the world and prohibitions against destructive uses. The operative commandment is *Bal tashchit* (Do not destroy).

The final article in the collection is, appropriately, “Reuniting Science and Value in the Natural Environment” by Daryl Tress (Fordham University), which takes account of the other essays that precede it. She sees the value-neutral stance of contemporary scientific thought as a danger to the environment. Science demands the freedom to make discoveries without ethical constraints, leaving decisions on the uses of discoveries and their consequences to others. But who are the others? Tress notes that among the sciences, ecology is uniquely value-laden, since ecology’s recognition of interdependencies in nature, including humans, introduces questions of obligation and prohibition. But what values are paramount: human benefit or preservation of nature as a living system? The answers are not clear, but the questions are being addressed in meetings like those of the Integrity Project, which produced the present volume.

The value of this collection consists mainly in its insistence that the intellectual experience of mankind in the ancient and medieval periods offers an indispensable background and resource to today’s discussion of ethics relating to the environment. With the exception of Yamakawa’s Buddhist perspectives, it is entirely a consideration of western culture with the salutary inclusion of Islam, which in respect to environmental thought parallels the other monotheistic traditions. It is as useful in its variety of approaches as in its attention to the common theme of environmental attitudes. Readers may well wish they had been present at the conference where the authors engaged in interchange.

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