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From Mastery to Mystery: A Phenomenological Foundation for an Environmental Ethic

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BOOK REVIEW

From Mastery to Mystery: A Phenomenological Foundation for an Environmental Ethic, by Bryan E. Bannon (Series in Continental Thought), Athens, Ohio University Press, 2014, 200 pp., £23.99 (paperback), ISBN 978 0 8214 2064 5

In his first monograph, Bryan E. Bannon questions the ethical ideal of mastery that has historically held sway over the human relationship with nature. Like Val Plumwood and Neil Evernden in environmental philosophy before him, Bannon addresses the metaphysics underlying the concept of nature. His project is hermeneutic, demanding a revision in how we understand ourselves in relation to nature. However, in attempting this revision, Bannon (unlike Evernden) retains the term nature, invoking Heidegger: we must “‘twist free’ of our already established ways of thinking before we can think anew” (7). The thinking anew he endeavours is a dramatic revision that unifies Bruno Latour, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Alfred North Whitehead into a non-dualistic, non-substantial, historical, relational concept of nature.

The first step of this twisting free is the introduction of Bruno Latour, who offers the strongest opposition to the concept of nature as an ontological category. In the book’s first chapter, Bannon takes Latour’s objections as a starting place for his reconceptualization of nature, aiming to avoid the dualistic baggage of historical metaphysics. He glosses Latour’s explanation of the modernist political project – the hyper-separation of “nature” and “culture” and its attendant oppressive political relations – and Latour’s alternative political ecology. Latour’s concept of a common world and especially its relational ontology in which its human and non-human members are assembled are the inspiration for Bannon’s reconceptualized nature and ideas for which he will find support in the respective philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Despite the book’s emphasis on phenomenology, Bannon enlists Latour for its duration, arguing that Latour’s ideas are less inimical to phenomenology than is generally thought. This point is addressed in some detail, as it is perhaps the most important of the resonances Bannon brings out between the thinkers, resonances that, on his view, have heretofore been overlooked or misconceptualized. Bannon shows that the phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty is not as distant from Latour’s relational ontology as even Latour himself claims, because both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty distance themselves from phenomenology from “lived-experience” (100). Bannon responds to Latour’s famous criticism of phenomenology as inevitably constricted to human consciousness by arguing for its de-subjectification through the combination of Heidegger’s phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh, where the human perspective is placed “upon the foundation of a nonhumanistic relational ontology” (44), as one among multitudes of perspectives in a nexus of relations. Bannon’s movement in this example is characteristic of his general efforts at congenial synthesis: he takes pains to highlight the parallels between the thinkers he engages, although sometimes downplaying differences that the thinkers themselves or other interpreters might find critical. However, whether Latour would consent to the version of phenomenology Bannon advances does not undermine the *thrust* of Bannon’s argument for a reconceptualized nature. Nor is it decisive (again, for the *thrust* of his argument) if Latour’s concept of *mediation* perfectly parallels Heidegger’s *being* and aligns with Merleau-Ponty’s *institution*, and so on.

In his second chapter, Bannon delves into Heidegger’s history of being. Again, he emphasizes a “deep resonance” (39) between Heidegger’s and Latour’s views, the most important of these

being their shared skepticism of a modern view of nature. As he lays out in chapters two and three, Heidegger's main critique of modernity, with which Bannon suggests Latour agrees in spirit, is that "*we can always think differently about being*" (41, original emphasis). Heidegger would be congenial to the relational ontology of Latour's common world. Indeed, for Heidegger, humanity defines itself through the relations it takes up: "The figure of humanity simply *is* the sum of the forms it uses to interact with beings" (70, original emphasis). In the third chapter, Bannon shows how Heidegger rejects an essential theory of nature and the mode of mastery, which has mistaken "a given interpretation of the being of beings for the unchanging essence of being as such" (14). Because, as Heidegger shows, substance-based metaphysics has sanctioned the devastation of nature through the very conception of it, this can only be avoided by disposing with nature as a substance or as a pre-organized system, again, pointing towards a relational ontology. Bannon's presentation of Heidegger's thinking is exceptionally clear, in part because he keeps his discussion with other accounts of Heidegger (especially Heidegger as an environmental thinker) to a minimum. He does, however, correct the common interpretation that mistakes Heidegger's thought as merely romantic or anti-technological.

However, Heidegger can only take Bannon so far in his project, as Heidegger's views privilege humanity as the "shepherd of beings ... the being who gathers other beings into a meaning" (159). Bannon turns to Merleau-Ponty in the book's fourth and densest chapter to challenge this privileged position, drawing mainly on Merleau-Ponty's later and unfinished works. The chapter is an attempt to tie Merleau-Ponty's work on perception into his less developed ontology of nature, one by which, following the offerings of Latour and Heidegger, "nature and history might be experienced anew" (98). According to Bannon, neither of the leading ecologically oriented accounts of Merleau-Ponty accomplish this: David Abram's argument for direct, sensual experience of nature misreads Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as suggesting that such unmediated access to nature is possible, and Ted Toadvine fails to appreciate the influence of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy on Merleau-Ponty's thought. Bannon, by his own admission, takes liberty in his reading of Merleau-Ponty, departing from the thinker's earlier writings to offer a speculative account of Merleau-Ponty's ideas about nature. From Merleau-Ponty's working notes on *The Visible and the Invisible*, Bannon generalizes his famous notion of flesh to all bodies, living and non-living. Nature, Bannon argues, as it is a "contingently formed, behaving ensemble of affective relations" (135) is the flesh of the world. Combining this with Alfred North Whitehead's process metaphysics that shows natural processes to be events, Bannon arrives at a conception of nature as an event, which, as a collective, relational participatory phenomenon, amounts to Latour's common world. (Bannon notes that Merleau-Ponty himself already made use of the phrase.) Thus, Bannon's finished revision offers a relational, non-dominating, non-substantial (and thus non-dualistic), historical (although not human-constructed) concept of nature, wherein humans are but one participant, and which refuses complete disclosure and, thus, mastery.

Ethical consequences follow from Bannon's reconception, of course, although many of them have been articulated already by the thinkers from whom he draws. From the outset, Bannon has attempted to develop a non-modernist concept of nature that can satisfy Latour's opposition to the term. One consequence, then, is distinctly Latourian: without "Nature" as an ontological category, any ordering by which we assess or understand the common world, any standard by which we measure or make decisions, is contingent and political. Bannon's hermeneutic vantage yields another ethical consideration: if the answer to the hermeneutic question of who are we can only be answered by pointing to the relations we enact and participate in with non-human others, then, echoing Heidegger, Bannon suggests that the devastation of those non-human others "alters ourselves and our own possibilities in the world" (145). However, if Bannon's project is hermeneutic and thereby his reconceptualization of nature requires that we

reconceptualize our understanding of ourselves, I wonder how radical we should take this self-reconceptualization to be. Specifically, if as Bannon argues, “we *care* first for nature, and from there we consider what is to be done” (1, original emphasis), how can Bannon’s expressly non-modern reconceptualization of nature avoid calling into question the standpoint of the original, caring (and seemingly very modern) subject, from which Bannon motivates his entire project? To be fair, Bannon states that he works from an “ongoing ethical commitment to a healthier environment” (6), and this reader, as I expect most will be, is sympathetic to this, even if questions about the grounding of this commitment remain unclarified.

From the introduction, Bannon makes clear that he will not offer a comprehensive account of the philosophy of Latour, Heidegger, or of Merleau-Ponty, nor will he provide concrete answers to environmental problems. His book aims – and succeeds – at providing “a *foundation* for a normative theory” (12, original emphasis). To build this foundation, Bannon seizes on convergences between the thinkers he engages. He forges alliances in the spirit, if not to the letter, of their respective views, and he adeptly moves from one thinker, to the next, and back again, although this may not entirely satisfy readers who prefer a sustained treatment of a single author. However, the synthesis Bannon develops in this highly creative and constructive work would not have been possible without such a strategy, without his dexterity, and without the impressively clear and succinct accounts of each thinker he presents.

The book’s conclusion is brief, but Bannon manages to offer some substantive suggestions towards a normative environmental framework. For instance, the concept of place, already developed in environmental ethics, is particularly compatible with his relational view of nature; places, too, are composed of relations between participating bodies, they are historical, they are “partial events of nature as a whole” (162), and they remind us that we cannot appeal to a particular arrangement of nature, existing outside of human meanings, for ideals or justifications. Still, Bannon is aware of the normative difficulty a relational concept of nature presents for environmental ethics: we forfeit most if not all of the normative ground on which we could previously adjudicate good and bad states of affairs (although Bannon thinks George Canguilhem’s concept of health based on stability and integrity at least demonstrates the possibility of a normative position). An additional normative consequence Bannon offers is that his revision compels us to dispel with the disposition of mastery: the phenomenology of flesh shows that complete unconcealment of nature is never a possibility, and that dispositions of care or wonder are more fitting for our participation in the collective event of nature.

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