



COMMENTARY

Environmental Arts as First Philosophy: This too a NeoPresocratic Manifesto

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ABSTRACT I offer a response and counter argument to J. Baird Callicott's "Provocations" piece in *Environmental Humanities*, volume 2. I argue that the historical narrative that Callicott derives from Aristotle regarding the development of philosophical thought from natural philosophy to social and moral concerns, is not the best way to conceive of the project of the Presocratics. Nor does this narrative offer us the best way to conceive of the distinctive tasks of the environmental arts (a term which I argue is to be preferred to the environmental humanities) and their relation to the sciences. I offer a different model, inspired by the Heraclitean notion of unity in opposition, which conceives the task of the arts as the common articulation of our myriad ways of being in the world and the task of the various sciences as the exploration of the world that is manifest in and through those ways of being. This model allows us to see how we might aim towards unity in opposition rather than a fusion of the two cultures. On this basis I make some proposals concerning the long-term and more immediate institutional and pedagogical consequences of this view and reflect upon the challenges facing my teaching on the UEA Master's in Environmental Sciences and Humanities.

In the latest issue of the journal *Environmental Humanities*, in a section entitled "Provocations," the environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott offers what he describes as a "NeoPresocratic Manifesto," a vision for developing an integrated worldview that will guide future academic work in both the sciences and humanities.¹ In essence, Callicott revisits the two cultures debate with an eye to the trends that have shaped environmental humanities over the past half-century or so. These are an acute, frequently enlightening and wide-ranging set of observations, made by a thinker whose work often helped to spark and cultivate the debates in question. Yet Callicott encompasses his observations in an impressive large-scale historical narrative, which I think is fundamentally misconceived and which, I contend, sets us off on entirely the wrong foot. Suitably provoked, I offer these brief considerations as a counterpoint to Callicott's view, followed by some reflections on how this alternative vision might work in practice.

What Callicott's manifesto proposes is that we should be working to facilitate the recurrence of a movement in the history of ideas that he thinks has taken place at least twice before. That movement is from the development of a revolutionary new natural philosophy to a

¹ J. Baird Callicott, "A NeoPresocratic Manifesto," *Environmental Humanities* 2, (2013): 169-186.

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concomitant revolution in social and moral thought. The Presocratic philosophers, Callicott contends, were primarily interested in natural philosophy, initiating a brand new way of inquiring into the natural world that did not simply rely on myth and religious vision. This inquiry then opened up questions and provided concepts for the investigation of social and moral life, pursued by Socrates and later Greek thinkers in tandem with natural philosophy. In particular, the atomism and determinism of some Presocratic philosophers provoked counter arguments from Plato and Aristotle, while others tried to mould a 'social ontology' to fit the preceding 'natural ontology.' The move from natural philosophy to social and moral philosophy was repeated in the early modern era, when Galilean, Cartesian and Newtonian natural science again preceded a correlative revolution in moral philosophy, represented by figures such as Hobbes, Hume and Kant. The consequences of this second movement seem to have been generally more negative than the first, resulting in the entrenched atomistic individualism of modern social thought. What Callicott advocates is the cultivation of a third such move, from the vision of holistic continuum generated by the physics and ecology of the 'second scientific revolution' to a social thought that recognises the "robust ontology of social wholes."²

In broad outline this is a familiar and very powerful story. The claims for conceptual movement from natural philosophy to social philosophy are certainly somewhat too strong, but I do not want to contest the idea that there have been such moves in many specific and limited cases.³ What I want to argue is that this is not a good way of looking at what the Presocratics initiated and that a closer look at some of their work can serve as a much better model for the future of the environmental humanities. Callicott explicitly takes his narrative from Aristotle's retrospective reconstruction of the progress of Greek thought. He takes Presocratic 'natural philosophy' to be concerned above all with determining the so-called 'material cause.' If we attempt to bracket Aristotle's account for a moment, many other intriguing possibilities for understanding the overall project of the Presocratics present themselves. One of these is that they were attempting to articulate what takes place when the world becomes manifest to us in the first place. They were less concerned to determine the basic causes at work in the world that has become manifest and far more concerned with what happens to bring about the very manifestation of the world.⁴

² Some time ago Freya Matthews beautifully sketched out something like the integrated NeoSpinozist view that Callicott is calling for. See, *The Ecological Self* (London: Routledge, 1991).

³ Conceptual movement is of course also possible the other way around, that is, from moral and humanistic concerns to the idea of nature. In fact, R. G. Collingwood made a good case for thinking that this is historically the more usual course of influence. See, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945) for the case made in broad historical terms and *An Essay on Metaphysics*, revised edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), Part IIIc, for a fascinating account of the changes in the primary reference of 'causation' from influence on historical action to a concept of natural science.

⁴ Such a possibility is, on my reading, roughly what Heidegger argued for in his many readings of the early Greek thinkers. Heidegger receives short shrift in Callicott's piece. At the very start he is accused of ignoring the Aristotelian distinction between 'first' philosophy (metaphysics) as first in the hierarchical order of thought and natural philosophy as first in the order of time. In fact, what Heidegger argues is that Aristotle was confused about what Presocratic philosophy was trying to achieve and that it was indeed first in the sense of fundamentally concerned with truth as the

I will not try to establish such a general reading of Presocratic philosophy here. If it can be made at all plausible then it seems to me that this would open up the possibility that the basic concerns of the Presocratics were far more in line with the concerns of contemporary environmental humanities than with the research programmes of contemporary natural science. Instead, I want to take a moment to put forward some rather speculative, anachronistic, but hopefully provocative thoughts inspired by one Presocratic philosopher, Heraclitus. The hope is that these speculations might refresh the two cultures debate in the era of global environmental concern.

Heraclitus is known as the thinker of continuous flux. A prime candidate for rehabilitation perhaps, in Callicott's project to cultivate a worldview of integrated continuum. But as least as important, if not far more important for Heraclitus, was the idea of unity in strife.⁵ Here are a few of the most pertinent fragments:

It is the opposite which is good for us.

DK 8

Couples are things whole and not whole, what is drawn together and what is drawn asunder, the harmonious and discordant. The one is made up of all things, and all things issue from the one. DK 10

Men do not know how that which is drawn in different directions harmonises with itself. The harmonious structure of the world depends upon opposite tension like that of the bow and the lyre.

DK 51

Each of these fragments is of course the occasion for a great deal of scholarly strife, and as always much hangs on the various surviving versions of the Greek texts and the intricacies of translation. Luckily the point I want to make rests upon the basic tenor of these fragments rather than such intricacies. It is that here we find another model for thinking about the unity of the sciences and humanities, contrasting with the "seamless union of natural and moral philosophy" that Callicott hopes we can recover if we "reunite those two cultures and fuse them into one."⁶ On the contrary, I suggest, if there is to be unity between the sciences and humanities, it will most profitably be seen as a unity in opposition, between intellectual projects that have quite distinct and sometimes opposing aims.

My own way of understanding what is essential to this opposition is to think of the two projects as involving, on the one hand the thematic exposition of various aspects of the world and the elaboration of how they fit together (sciences), and on the other hand, the attempt to

manifestation of the world, the truth that allows for all later inquiry into what it is that becomes manifest, including natural philosophy and metaphysics. In Heidegger's view early Greek thinking was not at all the prototype for modern scientific research projects, as it is for Callicott. Rather, the scientific drive towards a unified theory of everything is first made possible by the metaphysics that tries to grasp "beings as such and as a whole," something quite different to the early Greek articulation of the event in which beings come to light in the first place. See, e.g., Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking: The Dawn of Western Philosophy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984).

⁵ See, e.g., G. S. Kirk, "Natural Change in Heraclitus," *Mind* 60 (1951): 35-42.

⁶ J. Baird Callicott, "A NeoPresocratic Manifesto," 170.

articulate ways of living in the world together as the condition in which the world that the sciences explore manifests itself (humanities). Another way of putting this would be to revive the old scholastic and Spinozist distinction between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*. The sciences explore nature natured, the humanities articulate nature naturing. One consequence of this view is that I think it would be preferable, if at all possible, to abandon the name 'humanities' altogether. We live together in the world with myriad creatures that are far from human and the world that we live in is a far more-than-human world.⁷ How then should we designate the two projects? Since most other possibilities would be confusing or unlikely, I suggest we call them the arts and sciences.⁸ The unity of the University should be the unity in opposition of these two faculties, two opposing projects joined in their concern for the more-than-human world.

If universities could be persuaded to engage in some principled restructuring along these lines it might involve the dissolution of the faculty of social sciences into those of the arts and the sciences. Since I suspect that many social scientists would have a hard time swallowing the idea that social science is falsely modelled on natural science and that consequently "there is no such thing as a social science," as some of my colleagues have argued, the faculty of sciences would be a faculty of both natural and social sciences working together or in tandem. Some social scientists might be persuaded that they are in fact social artists and critics. Of course, there should certainly be far more truck between the arts and sciences than there is currently between the humanities and natural sciences, but this should not lead us to confuse their two fundamentally distinct projects.⁹

Furthermore, the tasks of the environmental arts should be far more creative, critical and self-critical than Callicott tends to suggest.¹⁰ Sometimes he comes perilously close to the

⁷ I take this phrase from David Abram, whom Callicott also cites with approval for his thoughts on the fundamental changes wrought by literacy on our ways of being in the world. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997). It is a little surprising that Abram's chief influence, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who did so much to take the findings of the sciences seriously, is not mentioned in Callicott's attack on phenomenological anti-naturalism. Callicott, "A NeoPresocratic Manifesto," 171, 175.

⁸ 'Arts' also have the advantage that etymologically the Latin *ars* denotes practical skill or craft, countering the assumption that only the sciences are of practical consequence. Further back the Greek *artios* meant 'just' and *artizein* 'to prepare,' with a common root in **ar* (fit together or joint), all of which could be taken to suggest that the arts are the common articulation of a just and prepared life together.

⁹ For a recent philosophical defence of the view that the social sciences are falsely modelled on the natural sciences see, Hutchinson, Read and Sharrock, *There is No Such Thing as a Social Science* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008). For an earlier and in some ways even more stringent view see, Michel Henry, "The Ideologies of Barbarism," in *Barbarism* (London: Continuum, 2012). For a general overview of the current situation and careful reflection on its prospects see, Jerome Kagan, *The Three Cultures: Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Ultimately we might also want to question whether 'environmental' is the most appropriate term to describe the project in question. Perhaps the 'ecological arts' would be preferable. We need not follow what appears to be Callicott's assumption that the term 'ecology' always refers primarily to ecological science as an integrated approach to biology, simply because Ernst Haeckel coined the term to refer to

view, rightly criticised by Ted Toadvine,¹¹ that the primary task of the environmental arts and humanities is to serve as public relations for the sciences:

I suggest that we philosophers and humanists generally can do our part to reintegrate science and its epistemology into the wider culture by expressing the new nature of Nature as revealed in the sciences, in the grammar of the humanities. The putatively “value-free” discourse of science—a mixture of mathematics, statistics, and technical terminology—is not readily or easily accessible. The discourse of the humanities—rich with imagery, metaphor, emotion, and honest moral judgement—resonates with a much wider audience.¹²

Although Callicott does later concede that the sciences must be open to the humanities just as much as the humanities must be open to the sciences, this remains a very weak vision of what the environmental arts might come to be. The arts are at once creative and critical. Their primary purpose is not to disseminate the scientific worldview in an appealing language that is easily understood without a great deal of effort. They are not about propagating preformed worldviews at all, whether they be scientific, counter-scientific or anti-scientific. The purpose of the environmental arts is the creative experience and articulation of our ways of being in the more-than-human world, which involves the expansion, criticism and the occasional shattering of worldviews.

Assuming that large-scale principled restructuring of faculties is a long way off, one might ask about the more immediate scholarly and pedagogical consequences of this view. The first such consequence would be that interdisciplinary environmental studies should not proceed on the assumption that we are all trying to say the same thing in different ways. We should not be afraid of cross-disciplinary critical engagement. Of course, this can only be fruitful in the long term if we are also willing to put some serious effort into re-educating ourselves in the other disciplines with which we wish to engage. Critical self-reflection is also crucial, although often far harder in practice. Yet even after all of that we should not expect that such re-education will on all occasions bring sympathetic consensus. Nor should we assume that it has been a failure if it does not do so. The second consequence is that we should try to be patient if our colleagues in other faculties prioritize their own concerns and perhaps fail to see the urgency of forging new research and teaching links. They may often be right! A university working as a unified scholarly community does not have to rest upon the fundamental assumption of shared priorities and goals and the future of environmental thought does not have to rest upon the desire for ecotopian consilience.

For myself, as a teacher on a recently developed Master’s course in Environmental Sciences and Humanities, I take from these reflections the following lessons. The course has

the study of all the conditions in which Darwinian ‘struggle’ takes place. Drawing on the etymological roots of the term as the study of what it is to ‘be at home,’ ‘ecology’ very quickly came to have a far richer and more complex set of references. Personally I think there are good arguments for and against using ‘environment’ and ‘ecology,’ not to mention ‘nature,’ as our core concepts in various different contexts.

¹¹ Ted Toadvine, “Six-Myths of Interdisciplinarity,” *Thinking Nature* 1 www.thinkingnaturejournal.com/volume-1/ (accessed 5 Sept 2013)

¹² Callicott, “A NeoPresocratic Manifesto,” 171.

been enormously successful in drawing together researchers and teachers from two faculties at the university, Science and Humanities, that very rarely have anything to do with one another. It has drawn upon this range of expertise to create unique modules that do not simply arrange different disciplinary perspectives side by side, but really allow for communication and critical engagement. If such a course is to continue to have a radical effect on the way we think about the natural world then we must continue to seek for our often hidden unity in opposition. I have suggested that the search for unity cannot elide the fundamentally different aims of our respective projects in the arts and sciences, to articulate and criticise the ways of life through which nature manifests itself and to explore the nature that is so manifest. Faculty members from the Environmental Sciences have so far included mainly those who have a serious interest in social science of one kind or another. We need to afford our students the opportunity for education and re-education in the natural sciences, while encouraging them to think carefully about whether an explicit dialogue between natural science and humanities really would be worthwhile and if so, precisely what it might achieve. We need to continue to think about the tasks and status of the social sciences and, if they have indeed often been falsely modelled on the natural sciences, then we need to understand the specific consequences of this for environmental thought. Crucially, we must resist the assumption that the social sciences can act as mediators between natural sciences and the arts. They may, or may not, work at the points of highest tension between the two, but their questions and approaches cannot and should not attempt to fuse the two projects into one. Finally, as 'humanists,' one of our primary tasks should be to seek unity in opposition to ourselves, in reflective self-criticism. The first such self-critical question that we need to answer is, I have suggested, whether the environmental humanities as such have a future at all. Or, whether they should perhaps transform themselves into the environmental arts, a creative and critical enterprise that seeks to understand our myriad ecologically entwined ways of being as they present and articulate the natural world to us, opening it up for the exploration of the various sciences. That would be a first philosophy for environmental thought that truly revived the first philosophy of the early Greeks.

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