

Lecture 4: Intro the Environmental Humanities, *Greek Metaphysical Thinking (eco-philosophy)*

Hesiod

Hesiod is environmentally significant because he recounts two creation myths, both of which parallel the Genesis story, as they suggest that the earth was once a perfect locus amoenus where human beings lived at peace with themselves and the planet.

In the second of his two stories, Hesiod suggests that there was once a “golden race of mortal men” that “had all good things; for the fruitful earth unforced bare them fruit abundantly...they dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands with many good things, rich in flocks” (Reader, p. 74).

(Note that they were “rich in flocks.” As we shall see with Theocritus next class, life in the perfect past was frequently portrayed as literally pastoral.)

As in the Genesis account, the break with the perfect past meant that human beings in Hesiod’s time (the “iron” age) could “never rest from labor and sorrow” (Reader 76). Clearly, even 2700 years ago when Hesiod was writing, the relationship that humans had with the earth was seen as far from perfect.

Prior to his account of the “golden race” (the Roman poet Ovid refers to their time as the “Golden Age”), Hesiod tells the story of the creation of Pandora, who, having both “a shameless mind and a deceitful nature” (Reader 72), metaphorically stands for all women.

As in the Genesis account, it is a woman who destroyed the perfect relationship that human beings had to the planet: before Pandora released evil into the world “the tribes of men lived on earth remote and free from ills and hard toil and heavy sickness” (73).

Both of Hesiod’s stories, as well as the Genesis account, portray a perfect relationship with the earth, now lost. Surprisingly, as improbable as they sound, in some sense even today we buy into these myths when we imagine that there was once a time when human beings lived at peace with the planet.

What is Nature?

A Raymond Williams, an environmental critic, once remarked, what makes this question so difficult is that “nature” may well be the most complex word in the English language, as it has accumulated many, many meanings over time.

Moreover, what we mean today by “nature” has not only been influenced by the Latin word *natura*, from whence it is derived, but also by the ancient Greek *phusis* and the Old English *kynde*, our language’s homegrown word for nature.

For our environmental purposes, it is important to note that “nature” is often used somewhat synonymously with words like “environment,” “landscape,” and “wilderness” -- in particular, environments that are free of human habitation.

We can see this meaning of nature emerging even as early as the 'Myth of Gilgamesh', as what was outside the walls of Uruk was nature, while what was inside was human culture. This nature-culture dyad reappears again and again in Western thinking, especially in later Greek philosophical thinking.

When we use “nature” as synonymous with “environment” or “wilderness” we are for the most part conceiving of nature spatially, as a place, someplace that we can actually visit, like Yosemite.

The ancient Greeks did not generally conceive of nature (*phusis*) spatially; rather, they understood it temporally.

In order to understand how nature can be conceived of temporally, it will be helpful to consider the landscape installations of artist Andy Goldsworthy, the subject of the documentary 'Rivers and Tides'.

Our reason for doing so is to reclaim the ancient Greek notion of *phusis*, to re-think what we in the West originally meant by “nature,” in the hope of gaining a clearer understanding of what nature means to us today.

Andy Goldsworthy

Many of Goldsworthy’s installations, such as the serpentine ice sculpture which opens the film, draw attention to the fact that “nature” is temporal (i.e. endlessly emerging, decaying, and in flux).

Such installations makes little attempt at holding off temporal change; rather, they draw attention to and celebrate nature as endlessly changing. Had Goldsworthy wanted a sculpture that endured, he could have carved one of granite or marble.

Of course, when Goldsworthy photographs the installations (he principally makes his living off his beautiful books of photographs), he freezes in time the natural process to which he is drawing attention. Goldsworthy has sometimes been criticized for this, as it subverts his primary mission of gesturing to nature as endless process.

Another way of looking at this is to think of Goldsworthy's installations as emulating nature, for example, something like a blossoming rose.

Like the rose, Goldsworthy's ice sculpture emerges completely into being for just one shining moment, then it immediately falls away. Indeed, the perfect moment when the sunlight backlit the sculpture also signaled that it had begun to melt. Time is important here as the rose, like the sculpture, came into and out of being; was caught in the process of becoming.

Many of Goldsworthy's installations reveal nature as short-lived:

Andy Goldsworthy 2

Even Goldsworthy's installations that seem permanent, lack permanence.

As the film made clear, the Storm King Wall in Mountainville, New York was in part made of stones from crumbling walls that were laid by farmers just a century or two before. Left unattended, the Storm King Wall will soon be crumbling like its predecessors.

Even seemingly stable stone cairns are subject to collapse.

Incidentally, although Andy Goldsworthy was (and still is) an innovator in landscape installations that gesture to the impermanence of the environment, he is by no means the only artist to do so.

Patrick Dougherty, for example, had a major installation, entitled "Toad Hall," at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden a few years ago that slowly decayed.

Dougherty has similar landscape installations all over the world.

Goldsworthy's installations offer a provocative answer to our opening question. What is nature?

Nature is birth, growth, and passing away, the endless process of process whereby everything everywhere is ever coming into and out of being.

Of course, other artists, such as the makers of the pyramids and ancient Greek temples, understood the role of art differently, as they created works that defiantly attempted to stand firm against the endless process of nature. As time has proven, these works have generally failed to do so.

Goldsworthy's concept of nature is similar to the one held by certain presocratic Greek philosophers, like Heraclites, who imagined nature like a stream.

Heraclites

The presocratic Greek philosopher Heraclites, who argued that it is "impossible to step twice into the same stream," believed that all of nature was in fact like an endlessly streaming stream, wildly in flux, as everything everywhere is constantly shifting across time, no sooner coming into than going out of being.

An example would be a rose (or Goldsworthy's ice sculpture), which comes into existence, blooms for little more than a moment, then passes away. Across the planet flowers are endlessly doing this, as is all life, including human beings. As Heraclites made clear, the Greek word *phusis* signaled this endless flux and becoming. Consequently, to Heraclites *phusis* was temporal, not spatial.

According to Heraclites and other presocratic thinkers, because nature (*phusis*, endless flux) is ever happening everywhere, it makes less sense to talk about it spatially than temporally. Andy Goldsworthy's installations, though obviously located somewhere, are nonetheless efforts to reveal nature as becoming (both as emergence and as passing away).

In contrast to Heraclites who saw nature as becoming, Plato, writing just a generation or two later, radically redefined (indeed deconstructed and inverted the definition of) *phusis* to no longer signal the process by which everything emerges and passes away, but rather to reference what never passes away but endures permanently.

Because nothing in nature is permanent, it was necessary for Plato to make huge epistemological shift, a meta-physical shift...

Plato (via Albernethy's Introduction to Western Metaphysics)

Plato knew full well that the Greek *phusis* signaled flux, endless change, and becoming (and passing away). In fact, one of Plato's teachers was the philosopher Cratylus, who was in turn Heraclites' student.

However, Socrates and Plato argued that there must be something more than the ever-changing existence that we apprehend through sense experience.

Consequently, Socrates and Plato postulated a fixed and immutability realm of ideas free of change, which they called the the meta-physical realm--literally, the realm beyond nature (physis), beyond change, where things forever and ever just are. Plato's realm of ideas is a realm not of becoming, but of being.

Thus, in a move similar to metaphysical theology, Socrates and Plato imagined a metaphysical realm superior to the physical (physis) earth. In fact, in a radical deconstruction of what was first signaled by physis, Plato called the metaphysical realm the only true nature.

Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger, a twentieth-century German philosopher, was aware both that physis originally signaled endless becoming (coming into being, as well as passing away) to Heraclites and other presocratic Greeks, and that Socrates and Plato had reversed, indeed deconstructed, this meaning.

To Heidegger, who in part made this deconstruction famous, it marked a turning point in Western thinking by inaugurating a "metaphysics of presence," which privileges constant presence, such as Plato's ideas, over the endless play of absence and presence that the Greeks named physis.

Heidegger, somewhat surprisingly, argued that modern technology is the completion of metaphysics. In order to do so Heidegger considered a modern hydroelectric power plant being built on the Rhine River. To follow Heidegger here it will be helpful to return to Heraclites' streaming stream.

Heraclites' Stream

Recall that to Heraclites a streaming stream was a near perfect metaphor for physis, as the stream is constantly streaming through Time. Hence you can never step into the same stream twice, according to Heraclites; by the time you step into the stream the second time it has already streamed away.

Streams are additionally a apt metaphor for physis as they change profoundly over longer periods of Time. The quietly streaming stream will at times stop streaming altogether and in some sense slip out of existence (during a drought), and at other times be barely recognizable as it becomes a torrent during a flood.

From the perspective of human beings living near and depending upon such a sporadically streaming stream, this can be an altogether frustrating situation, as the stream can never really be relied upon; in drought times it may not even exist, while during a flood it may become a life-threatening danger.

Heidegger's Dam

Heidegger argues the hydroelectric power plant built on the Rhine responds to the frustrating inconstancy of the streaming stream (river) as it is a massive dam intended to convert the river into a reservoir, which no longer sporadically streaming, is rather on call, ready for use at any time, constantly present.

Heidegger suggests that this is the "completion" of metaphysics because the builders of the dam have, in some sense, actually enacted and made real Plato's ancient dream of an entity free of the ravages of Time and phusis.

Of course, the reservoir is not literally a metaphysical entity in the way that Plato's ideas were imagined to be; nonetheless, it comes far closer to realizing the metaphysical ideal than the ever-changing river, which as Heraclites made clear, is itself an excellent metaphor for phusis understood temporally.

A parallel project would be if Andy Goldsworthy were to carve one of his serpentine ice sculpture out of marble in hopes of having it endure.

Heidegger argues that the quest for the "metaphysical" in our physical realm is one of the key features of technological modernity. Another example would be fossil fuels, which put an end to the frustration that human beings have had for thousands of years with the energy from the sun that we sporadically receive.

Seen in this way, the sun's energy is like Heraclites' stream. Sometimes it streams down in just the right amount to heat a properly designed house, sometimes it may be absent for a week or more during overcast weather, and still other times (such as summer) it can provide too much heat.

"Fossilized solar energy," in the form of fossil fuels, are in some sense like the dammed stream (reservoir) in so far as they can be stockpiled and held in reserve; ready to be deployed, though a rather astonishing range of technology, at the click of a switch to bring heat into our homes, or turn night into day.

In this sense, our love of fossil fuels is metaphysical; a frustration with phusis.

Heidegger took this idea even further by arguing that not only are so-called "natural resources" being stockpiled and held in reserve for our use, but in a frightening twist

of fate, human beings, now dubbed “human resources,” are also “standing in reserve” (what Heidegger called Bestand) waiting to be used.

Examples would include office workers in “cubicles” waiting in reserve to answer a phone or process paperwork.

Hannah Arendt, Heidegger’s student, agreed with him in many respects, but realized this has been happening for thousands, rather than hundreds of years.

Even as early as the Myth of Gilgamesh we see mention of bread and grain, which was the major technological innovation that made Gilgamesh’s culture possible, as human beings had a food, grain, which unlike fresh vegetables, could be stockpiled, held in reserve, for two or three years. To Arendt, all human cultures worthy of the name seek constant presence in their works.