

## Lecture 5: Intro to the Environmental Humanities, *What is Nature?* (ecocriticism, eco-theology, eco-philosophy)

### Dualism in the West

With the additional understanding of physical-metaphysical dualism in terms of technological modernity provided by Heidegger, and augmented by Arendt, we can return to our survey of dualism in the West.

The important, overarching idea here is that this dualism has existed in the West for well over 5000 years on a variety of registers, such as place, deity, time, etc. In most of these manifestations, the metaphysical is privileged at the cost of marginalizing the physical, physis.

The turn toward the metaphysical is environmentally troubling, especially when we realize that preference for it is literally being enacted, on a massive scale, in our highly technological modernity.

### The Physical and the Metaphysical

Fortified with this understanding of how the presocratic Greeks (like Andy Goldsworthy) understood nature as becoming, and how Plato radically suggested that true nature never changes and exists in a metaphysical realm, we can pull together what we have been saying so far this term about the relationship between the physical (the realm of physis) and the metaphysical.

What follows will be a recap of meta-physical dualism on a variety of registers.

### General

#### Meta-physis

Up here is that which is beyond the physical earth, change, and nature. The Judeo-Christian God, Heaven, and Platonic ideas exist up here.

#### Physis

"Nature" in the Greek sense of process, but also the realm of sense experience. Plants, animals, the earth, and everything physical are down here.

### Deity

Metaphysical deities that exist beyond the earth.

Shamash from the Myth of Gilgamesh, the Judeo-Christian God (Jehovah).

Earth Gods, who are moored to the earth, as they are part of it.

Genius Loci figures (like Humbaba in the Myth of Gilgamesh). Ancient goddesses figures: Persephone / Demeter / Hecate.

## Place

The Judeo-Christian Heaven and Plato's realm of ideas are each imagined as the ultimate locus amoenus, the most pleasant of all places, even though as metaphysical, they are placeless places that exist nowhere in the physical realm.

After the Judeo-Christian Bible and Plato's metaphysical philosophy, the earth is increasingly seen as an imperfect place (definitely not a locus amoenus).

## Time

This is a changeless realm of eternal life and pure being. Here things just are, and always will be as they are: immortal, perfect, unchanged. Example: the Judeo-Christian God & Heaven, & Platonic ideas like Justice, Beauty, etc.

This is Heraclites' realm of gignomai ("becoming" or "emergence into being"): birth, life, death; the endless bringing-forth and passing away of phusis. Example: a rose blossoming, a stream streaming, a human life, etc.

## Dualistic Human Beings

Up here is the realm of the soul (what later philosophers call the "mind"), which is the best part of a person, if not in fact the "true" human being.

The body will pass away, but the meta-physical soul lives eternally.

Metaphysical thinkers often privilege the soul and marginalize the body.

Down here is the realm of the body (to Christian theologians, the "flesh"), which is often seen as inferior by both Christians and Platonists alike.

Not only is the body seen as inferior, it is often believed to be a source of temptation (such as sexual temptation), sin, and evil.

## Plato's Divided Line

Divided line analogy: reason (A) is to this intelligible realm of ideas (B) as mere opinion (doxa, C) is to the sensory, earthy realm (D)

Up here is the "intelligible realm" where ideas are known by reason (nous).

The intelligible realm is to Plato true reality; the nature we sense is illusory. Interestingly, this realm is accessible to living human beings (unlike Heaven).

In this surprising approach, the sensory realm of earth and physis, like Plato's cave, is an illusionary appearance, a deception, an inferior copy. Thus Plato startlingly deconstructs reality, as the "real" world of nature, change, and life is found to be nothing more than an illusion, a cheap copy of a far better place.

What is nature?

True nature is meta-physical, the earth & physis are an illusion.

## Presence/Absence

Much of Western philosophy after Plato has been a quest for constant presence, that which is ever present temporally: Truth, Beauty, God, and so forth.

Idea, Plato; Substance, Aristotle; Subjectivity, Descartes; Absolute Spirit, Hegel; Will to Power, Nietzsche; Presence, Heidegger and Derrida

Physis is the play of absence & presence, the endless temporal process of emergence and falling away. Sometimes a stream streams, sometimes it fails to stream (during a drought), and sometimes it floods with overabundance.

What is present is the present, which is a present that will soon be absent.

What is present (in this place, spatially) is the present (the now, temporally), which is a present (a gift of the moment) that will soon be absent.

## Artifacts

Artifacts are how Gilgamesh sought immortality (by rebuilding Uruk).

Temples, cities, and many artifacts attempt (but ultimately fail) to resist physis.

Examples: Pyramids; Sphinx (King Khafra); State buildings (U.S. Capitol); Corporate centers (World Trade Center); tombstones. Any-thing made by a culture that endures (tools, material culture, and so forth).

Japan's Jingu Shrine, which is a series of wood structures, accepted as being in a state of constant decay, that has been rebuilt every twenty years since the seventh century, makes a striking contrast to the pyramids and Greek temples. In fact, any human work that (such as food, clothing, etc) does not endure.

## Art

A culture endures through its art perhaps more than its artifacts.

The Myth of Gilgamesh gave Gilgamesh immortality, not the Cedar Forest.

Because such art holds a image (an idea) across Time, it is representational.

Shakespeare Sonnet 18: "Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day?... So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this & this gives life to thee."

Andy Goldsworthy's landscape art.

As we shall see with Virgil, because such art is principally gestural, it gestures away from itself to the ever-changing realm of phusis.

## Language

As Plato realized, language (logos) is where a culture's ideas exist over Time.

True, languages change and even die, but they endure far more than human life. Moreover, even dead languages live on today. For example, Plato infused his word idea (eidos) with a meaning that lives on in our word "idea."

Without language, how does a culture endure?

In part cultures endure through material culture (tools and artifacts); nonetheless, a shared language is arguably what binds a people together in the present and across generations more than anything else. Language lives and reproduces (is made new by artists constantly reinventing it) in literature.

## Modern Technology

Modern technology is a quest for constant presence (Heidegger). Ex: Heidegger's Dam, which puts an end to the streaming stream (Heraclites' play of absence and presence), fossil fuels, and human beings (Bestand).

All of the above in some sense seek to be like Platonic ideas and the Christian God in so far as they attempt to make physis endure across Time. They are all "conveniences" that convene the earth's re-sources.

Heraclites' streaming stream, which is a play of absence & presence.

Slow Food Movement (where we wait on the earth, not the other way around)

Heidegger, according to Hannah Arendt, is wrong, this does not begin in second half of 18th century.

## Ancient Technology

Agriculture, such as stored grain, seeks constant presence.

Ancient temples, cities, and enduring artifacts of all sorts. Hannah Arendt argued that all truly human cultures worthy of the name have always sought constant presence in their material culture (artifacts and art).

In Genesis, this is a result of the Fall; no need for agriculture in Eden.

Pre-agricultural cultures. Arendt argued that cultures that do not seek constant presence through their artifacts and art are not truly human, but rather merely animal laborans. Nearly every locus amoenus (Eden, Golden Age) is imagined as having no need for constant presence, as the earth provides a supply of everything, constantly.