___FINITE TECH, UNKNOWABLE NATURE

TOWARD AN ECOLOGICAL GRAMMAR

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In following the urge to rethink nature and our relationship to it, I recommend we take into account a fundamental movement of nature towards incompletion. Nature does strive towards organization and self-articulation, a striving that humans know and mimic almost too well. It is a movement we generally associate with technology (know-how), though it is actually more a dimension of nature than a unique human endowment. In recognizing this, we do not need to posit nature as a totality in advance. Nor should we attempt to bring its totality about, a task doomed to failure. We might instead listen to the incompleteness of nature inscribed in both our experience of it and the history of attempts to codify it. This could also help shake off some of the conceptual baggage weighing down Western philosophy's relationship with nature. In a recent book, *Nature as Limit*, I used the later work of Martin Heidegger as a vehicle to trace some of this baggage while also sketching a possible view of nature that emerges from it. I'll outline some of the thinking that emerged from that project here, touching upon the naturalization of technology, the unknowability of nature, and humankind's lack of coincidence with itself.

The Naturalization of Technology

The Heideggerian critique of metaphysics rests on an understanding of the *logos* as the occurrence of structure or organization. Metaphysical philosophy remains

oriented by Form in its Platonic sense. It understands the *logos* as an antecedent formal principle of organization and its conception of *physis* is determined by the precedence of the technical production of knowledge. An initial pre-Aristotelian inseparability of *technē* and *physis* has been 'resolved' in his *Physics*, and thereby all subsequent Western metaphysics, through a *forced splitting that produces a technical image of nature*. Thus the understanding of nature that reigns in Western philosophy has always been that of a nature subject to the mediation of Form – a sort of Promethean moment where the human mistakes *technē* as a skill endowed uniquely to it, rather than as a dimension or operation intrinsic to nature itself. Heidegger's attempt to undo this split is guided by his own inability to fully distinguish between nature and truth, *physis* and *aletheia*, terms that carry overlapping elaborations and even appear at times as synonyms. As they are extrapolated from Greek thinking (both 'metaphysical' and pre-Socratic), both carry the sense of a unified opposition or polarity: presence and absence, revealing and concealing, emergence and hiding.

When in the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, Heidegger began to concern himself with the 'essence of technology', or *Gestell*, this thinking followed directly from the critique of metaphysical philosophy that preceded and accompanied it. The structure of *Gestell* is little more than the structure 'discovered' in the analyses of metaphysics and metaphysical thought, as the latter mirrors the former. This can be seen in the progressive development of Heidegger's thought through the critique of metaphysics into the discussions of *Technik* and *Gestell*, and also in the lexical emphases that began in the critique and form the basis for the vocabulary used to describe the essence of technology. This vocabulary is constructed around the German verb *stellen* ('to place'), which comes to name the particular understanding of the *logos* that guides Heidegger's analysis of Aristotle's *Physics* in 1939. What is

called *Gestell* is in truth a consolidation of the structure that has emerged from the critique, leaving us with the formula "metaphysics = technic". From this point forward, *Gestell* marks one end of the polarity indicated in *physis* and *aletheia* – the productive, intelligible end. It is in this sense that technology is 'naturalized', that is to say, incorporated in a broader understanding of truth from which it is inseparable.

The phrase 'naturalization of technology' here is not intended to imply that nature functions like a machine, or that it can be mechanistically or instrumentally reduced. It does, however, affirm a productive and potentially mechanistic force of nature that cannot be split from it. A certain mode of knowledge production, that of metaphysical or technical-formal knowledge rooted in optics or intelligibility, is derived from the corresponding dimension of nature, namely its tendency towards what thought experiences as the intelligible world.

Technic as a unique trait of humankind is replaced by the notion that nature contains within itself the capacity to produce knowledge about itself, a capacity in which the human participates through some unique inclination. The naturalization of technology indicates that nature strives to know itself in a manifold of modalities, where the term knowledge stands in near synonymy with structure. The human experience of this and its tendency to comport towards intelligibility has led to an understanding of this as humankind's unique ability to bring form to nature, a matter which may be difficult to refute, but which nonetheless has been vastly over emphasized and overestimated, at least over the development of Western culture traceable to Greek metaphysics.

The attempt of thought to produce a split between Nature and technic, technology, or culture can only result in the erasure of Nature and especially of Nature as a productive force. This erasure creates a void to be filled either by human ingenuity (constructivism) or misled idolatry (the Spinozist "god or nature").

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Naturalizing technic limits the human capacity to both construct nature and posit it as the most high by drawing out a finitude inherent to it. Neither nature nor knowledge want to be whole.

The Rejection of Totality (Nature)

In following the productive or technical dimension of nature, the main folly of Western philosophy is to place *completion* in an antecedent position, be it structural/conceptual completion or real completion. Heidegger's rejection of this variation of the absolute is a key motif throughout his thinking. This is exemplified famously in early writings when the experience of *das Seiende im Ganzen* (the totality of what exists) is said to be impossible without a corresponding experience of *das Nichts* (the Nothing). When thought encounters intelligibility it simultaneously encounters the impossibility of its totality, an impossibility signified here by the nothing. This motif, rooted in his interpretation of *aletheia* and an Heraclitean *physis* that "loves to hide", continues to develop in his later thought in examples like the emptiness, vacuity, or passage of the thing, the unknowability of the godhead, and the excess or overabundance of presence. It is in this interruption of the totality that we find a sense of how nature might be thought outside the optic, technical paradigm inherited by Greek metaphysics.

    If we maintain that Heidegger is unable to separate *aletheia* and *physis* conceptually, we are led to interpret nature from this particular entanglement. We see then that the most 'originary' sense of nature to be gleaned from Heidegger's thinking is typified in his use of terms like 'withdrawal' and 'expropriation'. Following the development of Heidegger's thought we see that the thinking of technic or

Gestell precedes a fuller elaboration of *physis* and *aletheia*, especially in later texts focused on language or otherwise developing the term *Ereignis*. Nature as something 'negative' or subtractive comes to Heidegger's thought through a full elaboration of the finitude that disrupts metaphysical/totalizing thought and, in turn, disrupts the productive dimension of nature.

The nature of nature, then, is its tendency to interrupt itself, that is, to interrupt its own productive dimension in a 'more original' antiproductive moment. In *Nature as Limit*, I referred to this 'antiproductive moment', a term I now borrow from Neyrat, as 'delimitation', since it is this constant interruption of productivity by finitude that makes technic possible for Heidegger. Nature is understood as the constant reproduction of a gap, of a refusal of totality, wherein nothing can correspond with itself completely. This means the obliteration of Fichte's "I", which Heidegger finds already recognized in the thought of Friedrich Hölderlin. We might say there is something of a reversal here. The antecedent position is no longer totality but fundamental incompleteness as the possibility of perpetual beginning (or recreation). And while it may seem that Heidegger has simply replaced a preoccupation with 'presence' with a preoccupation with 'absence', this is not entirely the case. It is better to say that, in maintaining the polarity suggested in both *physis* and *aletheia*, Heidegger thinks the relationship between nature and truth in terms of this interruption.

It is in this context that the human can be considered. Thought is the fundamental activity attributable to humankind, and what delimits human thought is death. It would be impossible to fully describe Heidegger's peculiar understanding of human death here, but suffice it to say that it is in line with the 'dark' pole of truth. *Dasein* has always had something 'environmental' about it, embedded at once in a world of intelligibility and its lack. In the later Heidegger we see that *Dasein,* as the

occurrence of human thought, occurs simultaneously with the delimitation, the antiproductive moment, of nature. The privileging of the human remains here, something that very often and very quickly elicits rejection in the natural philosopher. But perhaps this 'privilege' is useful in a climate where we are compelled to (re)think our relationship to nature and take action on it. For in this understanding, thought's privilege is its proximity to truth, to presence and absence, a slice of infinity that coheres without forming an identity. Or, perhaps it is better to say that the only identity of thought is with the ecological situation upon which it opens and from which it remains ultimately inseparable. Leaning on the verb cohere is necessary in this instance, since the traditional binary ordering of reality has totally collapsed here – no subject, no object. Death and the ultimate unknowability of nature are meant to temper human hubris, a sort of weak guideline for making use of nature's productive reality, from which we and it are inseparable.

I use the term 'coherence' tentatively to describe nature as we know it and as our 'existence' occurs within it. The term designates, in the first place, a "hanging together" which aptly translates the German sense of *zusammenhangen* ('to cohere, to hang together') as it is used to denote relation in a phenomenological context. It is also the term chosen by Brook Ziporyn to orient his work on the problem of oneness and difference in Chinese philosophy. His broadest definition of the term points

> on the one hand to the mode of togetherness of any distinguish*able* (as opposed to "ontologically genuinely distinct") elements contained "within" a putative item, and on the other hand to the ways in which what is distinguishable as this entire item is embedded in its environment.[1]

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[1] Ziporyn, 6.

Important here is that, in Ziporyn's studies of Chinese philosophy, the occurrence of coherence – as this 'whole" indicated in the "on the other hand" – is not subject to a preceding idea or principle of organization through which it and its mode of togetherness might be described or explained. This, I think, is in line with the anti-Platonic impulse in Heidegger's attempts to do away with or go beyond the necessity of the antecedent position attributable to Platonism and Greek metaphysics more broadly.

In speaking of coherence, and especially as it pertains to the framework I've been sketching here, there is nothing that exists in the classical ontological sense. And this is not simply because everything is related, relation, or in relation. Relation is indeed a primary mode of existence, but it is only ever partial, which is to say that without the absence of totality, there is no relation. Everything may be related, as ecology loves to assert, but relation does not tend towards a totality, some great throbbing invisible mass. This would require the antecedent position just mentioned, the positing in advance of total relation. Relation in the sense offered here simply holds things together, for a time.

There are a number of things that might be said here about the implications for time, space, and history in this view of nature. For example, one might pose the question of the link or disjunction between linearity and some other temporal form when considering how coherence, to the extent that it is an organizational concept, allows for the arrival or progression of history. I have touched upon some potential responses to this in *Nature as Limit*.[2] The truth of the matter is, however, that it is at this point that Heidegger's thought runs up against its limits as a vehicle for thinking nature. In my experience, exceptions permitted, this is the case for the majority of his followers and interlocutors, including those that keep their proximities and affinities

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[2] I have attempted to sketch an understanding of time as topological.

silent. If I pose the question of ecological thought and a potential ecological subject, much remains to be considered. There is no real program to be offered here, only some scaffolding and a few remaining thoughts on language.

III. Transitional Remarks

In terms of what might be done with all this, I can offer only a few remarks on method and sources. The question of method in what can inevitably be called humanities research is in large part limited to the source material it takes on. In the first place there is critical work. Critical work on the question of nature and/or ecology (eco-critical questioning) is perhaps most easily described as work on concepts and specifically the structure of concepts: what are the particular structural functions of a concept and the 'how' of these functions. In the case of the preceding, our concepts have come from Heidegger, Neyrat, other theorists of ecology and nature, and myself.

Work on the structural dimension of concepts leads to reflections on language more broadly speaking. The questions that arrive here are manifold and include those of meaning, lexicology, etymology, grammar, history, culture, and so on. Reflection on language leads us towards the possibilities and limitations of language. I previously mentioned the limitations of Heidegger and his interlocutors. These limitations are not merely conceptual or historical, but relate to the entire (fictional?) structure of the Indo-European. Heidegger is quite clear on the limitations of Western metaphysics, criticizing both its over reliance on binary structure and antecedence as well as the limitations of its grammar. His solutions are innovative and go some way to accomplishing what he seeks for thought. In large part, they are inspired by

philological practices and Hölderlin. The construction of his essays evolved to rely less on linearity and draw more upon a paratactical arrangement while also borrowing from more 'poetic' uses of language. And yet, despite what he is able to squeeze out of these practices, their most practical import may be in highlighting the impasse that arrives when German, via Greek, ends up at the roots of a hypothetical language family, Proto-Indo-European, which again threatens a Platonic antecedence. Thus the choice to appeal to Ziporyn's work on Chinese philosophy is not random.

That Hölderlin was already running up against this problem is evident in the composition of the hymns and his work on Greek tragedy. David Rattray's beautiful translation and commentary on some of his Pindar translations ends by claiming that this work shows Hölderlin "listening for an as yet unimaginable machine that will set forth the grammar of the new Millenium."[3] The backdrop to this is an intermingling between the divine and the human, not terribly dissimilar from the impossible entanglement I propose of thought and nature, which is concrete in and by language. This inevitable commixing leads to a separation (and not a split!) within itself of the human, that is, by way of its relationship to the totality and harmony of nature (the divine) and its being torn asunder *with* nature into the reality of finitude. As Rattray puts it, Hölderlin longed to be reunited with Father Helios while yearning "to lose himself in the dark caverns of Mother Earth".[4] In listening, Hölderlin's Greeks are already, according to Rattray, winks or indications of fictional "Indo-Europeans" that held the keys to both the present over which they rule and the future that exceeds them. And Hölderlin's listening is at once a haruspicating that seeks to prepare a new grammar, one that will free him towards the language of his "two minds".

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[3] Rattray, 261.
[4] Rattray, 259.

In attempting to intervene in a long established understanding of nature and humankind's relationship to it, are we not on a similar path as that set out by Hölderlin? Most may not fancy the mythological weight carried by such a designation, especially given the hold that both apathy and a science long in crisis have over us. But if we utter the words ecology and climate with a sense of urgency, then we are aware we stand before the dam. Those of us who have reached this point through a mostly Western intellectual inheritance may recognize that the trajectory of Western culture and philosophy has long ago now landed before the dam. I do not simply propose the initiation of a now Non-Western trajectory of world history that would lead me back into a typical dualism. Let those better suited to commentary on geo-politics sort such things. But I do suggest that a comparative and integral approach might be helpful in our work with and attentiveness to the language(s) we need to use in order to disorient and reorient our relationship to reality, to better listen to and haruspicate whatever it is that can lead us there.

All this does invite the question of who I am actually talking to. I propose a work that is a work on language in the broadest sense, from a critical structural analysis of concepts, to philology and history, to poetry. All of this is quite within academic vocation and it is fine that many will disagree with me. Critically, and not personally, it maintains the task in motion. However, I do often wonder whether or not those 'boots on the ground' protectors of nature hear us in our very peculiar and often insular tongues (guilty!). For ultimately a work on language, a work on history, is a practical task.

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[Note! It has been brought to my attention that the penultimate line here might be read condescendingly towards eco-activists and other boots-on-the-ground folks. Nothing could be further from the truth. The line is intended as an acknowledgement of the limitations of my assumed vocation here and, moreover, an invitation to collaboration. As a writer and educator working inside and outside of the academic humanities, there is a gap I'm looking to bridge without knowing where to start.]

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