

Book Reviews

Thomas Heyd. *Encountering Nature: Toward an Environmental Culture.* Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007. xvi+190 pages. ISBN: 0754654230 (cloth). \$99.95.

Reviewed by Eric Sean Nelson, University of Massachusetts Lowell

This multifaceted, rich, and textured work consists of a series of reflections on particular examples from a variety of cultural-environmental matrices and environmental sites. These extend from North and Latin America to Asia and indigenous Australia; from workplaces and reclaimed mining and industrial sites to gardens, rock art, and poetically wandering with mountains, rivers, and forests. Through these encounters with socially-historically informed environmental phenomena, as even the most remote wilderness and purist nature are culturally oriented, Thomas Heyd engages issues concerning the extent to which nature can be encountered and what roles cultures play in diminishing, allowing, or promoting the occurrence and impact of such encounters. Whereas there often appears to be a vast divide between the human and the natural, the anthropocentric and biocentric, Heyd proposes a third strategy, which is to trace the interconnections and tensions between cultures and environments, ethics and aesthetics, and scientific knowledge and lived-experiences.

The thesis of the work is also the basic challenge of environmental thought and practice: as environmentally appropriate cultures encourage more attentive encounters with nature, attentive encounters with nature will tend to promote more environmentally perceptive and respectful cultures, but currently we seem to be able to achieve neither of these. Although environmental philosophy and ethics—and their concern with argument and justification—are important for Heyd, more crucial are the everyday moralities and sensibilities through which individuals and groups live in various relationships with animals, plants, and environments. It is here, at the level of culture, where issues of environmental responsibility and ecological conscience, or the lack thereof, need to be confronted and transformed, since environmental degradation is primarily a consequence of cultural mismatches with nature. This is especially true in the workplace, business, and corporations, as explored in chapter three, where the most powerful decisions, forces, and side-effects impacting environments—and the humans, animals, and plants within them—are at work. Heyd portrays how the workplace is a central site for environmental

conscience and responsibility. He offers a valuable examination of the culture of work and its possible practical transformations, yet this analysis would be more compelling if it did not remain at the level of culture but also investigated the social-economic and material conditions and contexts of these values, practices, and institutions.

Environmental adaptation and coping, given the increasing degradation of and consequent changes to environments, calls for recognizing that cultures do and can play positive roles in relation to environments. Cultural responsiveness and attentiveness to natural settings and beings occurs through the cultivation of an embodied and situated environmental ethical conscience and aesthetic sensibility. Examples of more environmentally appropriate cultures of nature, which encourage encounters with nature even if the modern west might not adopt any one of them wholesale, can be found in various cultures where animals, plants, and environments are perceived as social co-agents, and as deserving a kind of respect, recognition, and attention. Heyd describes this as the autonomy of nature. He argues that it is crucial to culturally recognize nature as autonomous such that it can or is allowed to show itself and we can encounter it. Such culturally enabled encounters are contrasted with the culturally enabled reduction of, imposition on, and application of force to nature. Heyd's argument is convincing to the extent that it concerns two patterns of culturally relating to environments, plants, and animals: one in which they are raw material, the other which accords them recognition. Heyd's fairly persuasive minimal account of the autonomy of nature becomes less compelling when it slides over into a more ambitious and speculative portrayal of natural beings as teleological projects of self-realization at the conclusion of chapter two. This seems problematic to the degree that such appeals are unneeded for his argument and, as evident from the history of western metaphysics, they do not necessarily entail a greater attentiveness and respect for natural beings and environments.

Eclectically employing a variety of ethical theories and moral examples in part one, he concludes by considering some compelling examples of hybrid culture/nature matrices in Latin America. He stresses how conscience is interconnected with a sense of local community and sense of place, which does not only include other humans but animals, plants, and environments. In these instances, nature is not the absolute other of culture but instead is treated as an active co-participant and co-agent. Nature is itself social and cultural just as the community is part of the environment. These communities are not reacting against modernity and globalization in a merely negative or nostalgic way. Instead, according to Heyd, they are adapting their local knowledge, morality, and indigenous traditions to the current social-political and environmental situation in asserting their autonomy and self-sufficiency through various forms of resistance to political and economic forces. These peoples and Latin American environmental theorists, who have reflected on their ways of life and resistance, do not deem anthropocentrism and biocentrism to be the issue.

They are primarily and more pragmatically concerned with how to live within their environments in such a way as to allow humans, natural beings, and their environmental contexts to flourish. Consequently, ethnoecology, social ecology, and liberation or restorative ecology are three central Latin American environmental strategies that suggestively—if in different ways—emphasize the hybrid and social character of nature and culture.

Whereas part one is devoted to environmental ethics and moralities, part two turns to issues of environmental aesthetics. Heyd shows in these chapters how aesthetic appreciation is and should be oriented and enriched by as many stories about nature as possible that promote encountering a multiplicity of natural environments and beings. Although myths, stories, and poetry can diminish openness to or be antagonistic toward natural phenomena, they can also promote such tendencies as part of a culture of nature. Such an environmental culture, Heyd argues, cannot be based on the model of scientific knowledge or cognitive truth alone. In a revealing discussion, he shows how the poetry and the metaphoric and literal wandering of Bashō suggests an example of an aesthetics of nature that culturally situates, recognizes, and recuperates natural spaces and places. The cultural opens up encounters with nature that can themselves transform culture, as Bashō transformatively describes natural encounters and redescribes places and spaces portrayed in previous literature.

Heyd subsequently explores how the rock art of indigenous Australians opens up and orients lived landscapes that are themselves reshaped through the interaction of oral traditions and current lived experiences, and how recent reclamation art can reconfigure mining and industrial sites in order to show the difference between these sites and less degraded environments. Through such descriptions, Heyd stresses the importance of culture for encountering nature and the possibility of culturally shaped nature speaking back and responding, even in its damagedness or woundedness. That is, abject environments can provide graphic examples of devastation and motivate the need to live less destructively in relation to the natural world.

In section three, Heyd considers the mutuality of nature, culture, and natural heritage through examples such as the Northern Plains boulder structures, environmental restoration in Japanese gardens and earthworks, and botanic gardens as collaborations between humans and plants. In these cases, culture is not simply imposed upon boulders, environments, and plants; rather the interaction of humans and their environments transpire through the matrix of culture and nature. We accordingly need to promote environmental cultures that are more attentive to and respectful of nature, and that encourage environmental encounters that in turn promote cultural adaptation and transformation of the kind that we will increasingly need under conditions of greater environmental distress.

Appeals to experiencing and encountering natural beings and environments are important for environmental reflection and practices. Yet, insofar as historically formed social-economic structures mediate and hinder

such encounters and experiences, an environmentally oriented social critique and genealogy—and perhaps a more fundamental societal transformation—are also called for. Nevertheless, if more environmentally appropriate and attentive ways of life are to be cultivated, and if they are to be motivationally as well as theoretically compelling, environmental thought and practice require such experiential encounters and their culturally conditioned encouragement. Heyd’s work is accordingly a valuable contribution indicating a variety of promising strategies for furthering greater attentiveness to and respect for nature through engaging the cultural contexts and conditions that promote and hinder human encounters and interactions with nature.

David Michael Kleinberg-Levin. *Before the Voice of Reason: Echoes of Responsibility in Merleau-Ponty’s Ecology and Levinas’s Ethics.*

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. xv + 289 pages. ISBN 978-0-7914-7549-2 (paper). \$29.95.

Reviewed by J. Aaron Simmons, Hendrix College

Whether or not a particular book is to be recommended depends upon what reason one has for reading it. Accordingly, my recommendation of David Michael Kleinberg-Levin’s new book, *Before the Voice of Reason: Echoes of Responsibility in Merleau-Ponty’s Ecology and Levinas’s Ethics*, depends on exactly what a specific reader might be looking for. If the desire is for a sophisticated account of continental philosophy of language, then this book is truly remarkable and I recommend it highly. However, considering the audience of *Environmental Philosophy*, if one approaches this book expecting to find a developed application of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and Levinas’s ethics to the debates occurring in contemporary environmental thought, then the enthusiasm of my recommendation is much more restrained.

The basic argument of *Before the Voice of Reason* is that the “human voice” is not something that is self-inaugurating. Indeed, as Kleinberg-Levin convincingly suggests, “the human voice is always engaged in a dialogical relationship with other voices” (5). Importantly, this engagement is not merely an empirical fact that accompanies the historical existence of a particular ego. Instead, the crux of Kleinberg-Levin’s account is that “prior” (temporally, logically, and ethically) to this existence itself—even *constitutive* of it—is the *speaking* of other voices (Merleau-Ponty) and of the voice of the Other (Levinas). For both thinkers, Kleinberg-Levin contends, to be a speaker is always already to have been a listener. The deep listening that constitutes selfhood is not to be confused with an action volitionally undertaken, however. The very stability of agency as a basis for human sociality is contested in favor of an ontology of indebtedness and an ethics of gratitude. Whether this be due to the security and safety provided by the world-sheltering gestures of one’s