David Macauley
Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas.
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Macauley's *Elemental Philosophy* aims to use the ancient framework of the four elements to organize and motivate a discussion of contemporary environmental issues. The purpose of the inquiry is 'not simply to see the manner in which the four elements have been elevated into philosophical ideas…but to help lead this thinking back to engaged experience and practical environmental action' (2). This is an idea with a great deal of promise. Philosophers have an important role to play in helping the public and policy makers understand and act on environmental issues. The framework of the four elements is familiar enough to non-philosophers to be attractive, and philosophically rich enough to start a discussion, so there is a realistic hope that this approach will actually bring some people to make practical decisions that are better for the environment than they might have made otherwise.

One might object that the theory of four elements is outdated, unscientific, false, not sufficiently prominent in contemporary culture or otherwise inappropriate for the purpose of illuminating environmental issues. That may all be so, but Macauley's claim isn't that the theory of four elements is useful because it is true or accurate or at the forefront of the public's mind. Rather, the four elements provide an organizing principle for environmental issues, one that draws attention to the right features of the natural world. The four elements are familiar enough to be recognizable and draw attention. From there, everything depends on what happens in the details of the discussion under each of the headings of earth, air, fire and water.

The fairest way to evaluate a book is on whether or not it achieves the goals it sets for itself. While it is easy to like the fundamental idea of the book, its execution will not suit all tastes.

Publishers say that every mathematical equation in a popular science book reduces its readership by half; any book that begins with a quote from Heidegger is bound to eliminate half of its potential philosophical audience as well. Starting with Heidegger is, at least, honest advertising. The book is thoroughly continental in its orientation, with all the good and bad that that may connote.

For example, Macauley is expert at finding appropriate philosophical and literary quotations to drive his discussion forward. Probably, however, he finds too many of them. While the right quotation at the right time can be wonderful, too many can be distracting. In the end, the emphasis on erudition undermines the basic premise of the book. If the idea is to engage the public in practical environmental action, then it is surely

a mistake to write in such a way that one needs 61 pages of notes for 353 pages of text—330 individual notes in just the first 99 pages!

Macauley enriches his text by including passages from appropriate poems, which lends a nice feel to the proceedings. If one is going to quote E. E. Cummings, however, one should reproduce the poem as Cummings put it on the page, and not try to save space in a 433 page book by using '/' in place of line breaks.

Macauley attempts to be playful and poetic in his writing style. Sometimes it works: 'It is a long way from Heraclitus to the hydrogen bomb, but a reflection on the central role of fire in human thought and experience can help us to better understand our history and precarious place in the broader environment. Having seized it from the natural world, or as the myths suggest, stolen it from a supernatural order, we are now wedded like domestic partners—for better and for worse—to fire's seductive charms and incendiary threats' (42).

Sometimes Macauley's attempts to be poetic and playful are less successful. There is a tendency for the discussion to degenerate into mere word association rather than to provide a sustained line of analysis. One of many passages that illustrates this tendency is the following. 'Gilles Deleuze puts it this way: "thought itself presupposes axes and orientations according to which it develops." Thus, "it has a geography before having a history" that "traces dimensions before constructing systems." Indeed, the Presocratic philosopher Anaximander helped to found geography as a science in the sixth century B. C. E. by devising the first map of the earth as a physical whole, even if his map was more of a theoretical than a practical contribution' (64). The chasm bridged by the word 'indeed' here is yawning even in context.

When we get to passages like this, 'Politically, the so-called Red and Blue state division in the United States might even be rooted in a more primordial distinction between the realms of earth and water (since Blue states tend to be on the coasts and Red states in the middle of the continent)' (352), we must pass over in silence what only a slap to the forehead can truly communicate.

Macauley demonstrates a thorough knowledge of ancient philosophy. There are long individual chapters on the contributions to the theory of elements by Empedocles and Plato, and two on Aristotle. The secondary literature used to illuminate the ancient thought is decidedly continental. What is unclear is whether this level of detailed analysis is really appropriate to the aims of the book. Why do we need to know the intimate details of Plato's cosmology in order to use the concept of the four elements to motivate action on contemporary environmental issues? Yes, Empedocles anticipates modern ideas of cycles (including self-perpetuating ones), the unity of systems, purity and pollution, the equality of all parts of nature (including vegetarianism based on empathy with animals). The modern mind is so far from Empedocles, however, that mentioning him will be at best a distraction for most people, at worst an interpretive quagmire. Either way, it seems like a detour from the crucial task of engaging with environmental-philosophical ideas on a practical level.

The book's conclusions are not very closely related to the painstakingly intricate discussions of the history of philosophy that precede them. We get digressions on Andy Goldsworthy's environmental art, 'significant outcroppings of the four elements, too, in poetry, drama and literature' (343), even astrological interpretations of the four elements—but not much in the way of connecting the four elements to environmental action. Even the section 'Environmental Action' (345-52, a mere seven pages of the final chapter) begins, disappointingly, with a rehash of the tragedy of the commons.

The advantage of pitching environmental philosophy in terms of earth, water, air and fire is the immediacy and familiarity of those concepts. Despite the rise of modern science, the vast majority of people still experience and organize their ordinary lives in terms of these 'elements'. They are experiential, universal—they originated, after all, as a phenomenological summary. Particle physics and quantum chemistry are just not part of ordinary experience. What is important, then, is not the *depth* of an account of the environment in terms of the four elements, but its very *shallowness*. We can all wade in those waters, and when we can start the discussion on that basis it becomes easier to help ordinary people understand that they care about the health and flourishing of natural environments. Fully resolving environmental issues does require some of us to go deeper into chemistry, ecology, microbiology, climate physics and even philosophy, but the first step is motivating ordinary people to care about the natural world. In mobilizing people to environmental action, we need to aim for the pedestrian, not the peripatetic.

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