

John Sallis. *The Return of Nature: On the Beyond of Sense.* Indiana University Press 2016. 136 pp. \$70.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780253022899); \$25.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780253023131).

In this book, Sallis argues for the need to rethink nature in light of the ‘denaturing effects’ of our current economical, technological and political practices (8). The book primarily aims at revising our *understanding* of nature, drawing on a wide range of resources from the history of philosophy (Plato, Rousseau, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Emerson are among the main reference points), as well as on Sallis’ own phenomenological analysis.

The prologue provides a brief sketch of the main themes Sallis expands on in the rest of the book. They include the return from ‘the nature beyond nature,’ that is, from the intelligible nature to the nature accessible to our senses; the ways in which nature nevertheless transcends ordinary sensible things; the need for imagination to come to the aid of sense for a full grasp of nature (1-3).

The main body of the book may be divided into three parts. Chapters 1-4 do the preparatory work, primarily by discussing a number of themes from various figures in the history of philosophy that could be helpful for advancing the project of rethinking nature. Chapters 5-6 take actual steps toward rethinking nature, and chapter 7 deals with imagination as our means of engagement with it. Chapter 8 goes back to the history of philosophy in order to explore the possibilities of ‘thinking that exceeds being in its metaphysical determination’ (107)—a theme that has some affinity with Sallis’ explorations of the ways in which nature exceeds the sensible, but is of otherwise doubtful relevance to the project of rethinking nature. I will briefly discuss the content of chapters 1-6 (chapter 7 is too sketchy to understand its specific connections with the main project of the book).

Chapter 1 focuses on Emerson and Hegel. Sallis shows that Emerson’s discussion of nature is strongly informed by his engagement with Kant and post-Kantian idealism. He then discusses the relationship between nature and spirit in Hegel. At stake here is whether or not Hegel, like many modern philosophers, considered nature merely something to be subdued for the benefit of man, rather than something that has an intrinsic value as well.

Sallis argues that Hegel is ambivalent on this point: while Hegel repeatedly claims that nature is sublated in spirit, and even uses the language of ‘vanishing’ in this context, other passages show that, for Hegel, nature must also be preserved as that from which spirit distinguishes itself. Similarly, while in his lectures on aesthetics Hegel stresses the superiority of art as a product of spirit over merely natural beauty, and thus ascribes a far lower station to nature in comparison to spirit, Sallis argues that even here there are important roles left for nature. Thus, Sallis rightly points out that nature plays a decisive role in Hegel’s account of artistic genius. His other reference to the importance of the raw material for an artist to work with is less convincing with respect to Hegel: after all, as Sallis acknowledges, Hegel primarily focuses on *cultural* rather than natural material (26-7). In general, Sallis’ engagement with Hegel here is very cursory. This is quite unfortunate, given the scope and the unorthodox character of Hegel’s philosophy of nature, as well as its potential for exploring alternatives to the dominant ways of thinking about nature.

In chapter 2, Sallis provides a concise overview of the evolution of Schelling’s views on natural philosophy and on its function in his philosophical system, culminating in the discussion of its role in the 1809 *Freiheitsschrift*. Considering the difficulty of the material treated here, this chapter is perhaps the strongest in the ‘historical’ part of the book. The philosophical payoff here is the sketch of the unorthodox ontology provided by Schelling. In this ontology, natural things are conceived neither as grounded on intelligible archetypes (as in Platonism commonly understood), nor on the model of creation, as in theism. Rather, they are understood as ‘given birth by nature itself’, which birth is necessary for the self-revelation of God (42).

Chapter 3 does not focus on any specific thinker. Rather, it discusses the various forms that the 'return to nature' has been taking since antiquity. It touches on such figures as Rousseau, Emerson, Thoreau, Kant and the idealists, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. This chapter also anticipates the themes which are further developed later in the book, in particular the discussion of Nietzsche in chapter 4, and Sallis' accounts of elements and black holes in chapters 5 and 6. In general, this chapter is somewhat unfocused.

Chapter 4 discusses Nietzsche's inversion of Platonism and his abandonment of the intelligible ground of the sensible world. Similarly to chapter 2, Sallis provides a nice brief account of the development of Nietzsche's views on the subject. The significance of this discussion is that, after Nietzsche, natural things can no longer be understood by reference to some intelligible metaphysical ground. Rather, they should 'be apprehended as they show themselves or as they can be brought to show themselves' (66). Sallis analyzes Nietzsche's own attempts to move in this direction, in particular, his concepts of perspective and *Schein* (a word that is not easily translatable). The rest of the book represents Sallis' own attempts to move in this direction.

Earlier in the book, Sallis has already put in question whether there are 'discernible moments or entities that, while intrinsically related to sensible beings, nonetheless are distinct from them' (56-7); in other words, entities which are not perceived in the same way as ordinary natural things, and yet are not intelligible entities of the sort that Nietzsche criticizes. Chapter 5 provides an interesting example of such entities which Sallis calls 'elements' or 'elementals', acknowledging a certain affinity to the thought of the early Greek thinkers (75). The discussion of elements seems to be one of the most interesting and promising steps toward rethinking nature in the book. Sallis lists earth, sky, sea, forest, wind, rain, thunder and lightning as examples of what he means by elements (77). He argues that, although they are not perceived in the same way as other natural things, nevertheless they 'do not belong to a domain other than and apart from the natural and the sensible' (77). Sallis further provides some stimulating descriptions of the elementals and compares them with sensible things. As he points out, while ordinary sensible things are discrete and easy to individuate, the elementals are 'less readily objectifiable and less distinctly individualized' (77). Similarly, they do not have as clear borders as sensible things do, and they greatly exceed every measure that we rely on in everyday experience. Building on his discussion of perspective in chapter 4, Sallis also points out that, unlike ordinary things, elementals have only one perspective. The sky, for example, is always seen from the same perspective (one may wonder whether this is true for a forest).

While this discussion is interesting, one may ask whether these differences between the elements and the ordinary things are as significant as Sallis claims. For example, what is the significance of the great disparity in size between them? While clearly important in practice, what difference does it make for our *understanding* of nature? Similarly, it seems that, with a suitable change of perspective, at least some of the elementals Sallis lists *could* be perceived in the way more akin to our perception of ordinary things (think of looking at the Earth from a space station). Does Sallis privilege our everyday perspective over that provided by scientific instruments and technology, which might allow us to objectify the elements? One would like to see a substantive discussion of such questions.

Incidentally, a more serious engagement with Hegel's philosophy of nature (and philosophy of subjective spirit) might be fruitful for further articulation of the concept of elements. As Alison Stone has shown (*Petrified Intelligence*, chapter 5), the elements play a significant role both in Hegel's account of perception and in his account of what he calls 'physics'.

Chapter 6 deals with another kind of entities that are neither ordinary sensible things nor intelligible entities. Sallis' main example is black holes. They could not be perceived in the

ordinary sense because nothing, not even light, can escape their gravity. Thus, they have to be detected indirectly, through the effects they produce on the motion of other stars, masses of gas, etc. However, it seems that black holes and other examples from cosmology that Sallis provides are not at all unique in this respect. In fact, many entities postulated by scientific theories could only be perceived indirectly, through their effects (think of electron spin, or of electrons themselves, for that matter). It seems that, rather than pointing toward some fruitful way of challenging the mainstream picture of nature, these examples remain squarely within that picture.

I believe that the problem of rethinking nature discussed in Sallis' book is an important and urgent one. Some steps Sallis takes toward addressing it are thought-provoking and promising; others seem less successful. The book provides primarily an exploration of options and a search for conceptual resources from the philosophical tradition that could be of help in this project. As such, it is an important and stimulating contribution.

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