

# Naturalizing Heidegger

*His Confrontation with Nietzsche,  
His Contributions to Environmental Philosophy*

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## Introduction

**N**aturalizing *Heidegger*? Given that Heidegger is a phenomenologist, and that phenomenology is traditionally opposed to naturalism, any attempt to naturalize Heidegger's thought might at first seem, to use his own phrase, "a round square and a misunderstanding." But it all depends on what we mean by naturalism.

My argument in this book is that resources from the work of Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche can help us build a nonreductive naturalism that can support an environmental ethic. But what is a "nonreductive" naturalism? Why should it support an environmental ethic? Why Heidegger? Why Nietzsche? Why both of them together?

To answer these questions, I want to start with a more basic one: *Is value natural?* We could phrase the question in other and more precise ways: Are the values we ascribe to nature created or discovered? Do living things value or have value? Do animals? Does nature itself? Though it may be a crude form of the question, it is arguably the basic question of environmental philosophy, and it raises fundamental axiological and metaphysical questions that reach deep into the heart and history of Western thought.

While the question is old, it gains new significance in the modern world and new urgency today. One of the mainsprings of modernity is the emergence of a new conception of nature in the seventeenth century. In the most general sense, this shift from the medieval to the modern is the move from a teleological to a mechanistic conception of nature. In his magisterial study, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, E. A. Burtt conveys just how seismic this shift truly was:

For the dominant trend in medieval thought, man occupied a more significant and determinative place in the universe than the realm of physical nature, while for the main current of modern thought, nature holds a more independent, more determinative,

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## The Traditional Reading of Heidegger's Relevance for Environmental Philosophy and Ethics

Before we can address what our obligations to the environment might be, we have to determine what “the environment” or, more broadly, “nature,” *is*. In other words, we have to determine what is traditionally called the “metaphysical ground of ethics” with regard to the natural world. While Heidegger was mainly concerned with the meaning of being, Michel Haar observes that “beginning with the Turn of the 1930s, both in *Introduction to Metaphysics* and *Origin of the Work of Art*, a new thought of elementary nature emerges under the names of *physis* and earth. This nature . . . turns out to be very close to being itself.”<sup>1</sup> Though Heidegger’s retrievals of the Pre-Socratic and Aristotelian accounts of *physis* only come to the fore in his work in and after the 1930s, it is a mistake to frame his philosophical interest in nature as merely a later development. Already in the early 1920s, Heidegger was mining Aristotle’s works in hopes of finding and forging a model that more adequately describes human existence than the primal Christianity of Paul and Luther that had dominated his thinking up until that time.<sup>2</sup> The notion of factual life that Heidegger employs in some of these early lectures and that would serve as the backbone of his existential analytic in *Being and Time* is largely a phenomenological reinterpretation of some of the seminal concepts in Aristotle’s *De Anima* and *Physics*, especially the concepts of life and nature. It turns out that for early and later Heidegger the meaning of being has much, if not everything, to do with the meaning of nature.

In this chapter, I first survey the numerous attempts to assess Heidegger’s philosophy of nature and frame him as a protoecological thinker. Second, I analyze three unique aspects of Heidegger’s approach to nature: his positions on anthropocentrism, axiology, and scientific naturalism.

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## The Question concerning Biology

### *Life, Soul, and Nature in Heidegger's Early Aristotle Lecture Courses*

In this chapter, I trace Heidegger's investigations into life and animality in the lecture courses on Aristotle in the early-mid 1920s. Here, I stress three factors: 1) the influence of biologist Jakob von Uexküll on Heidegger's reading of Aristotle; 2) Heidegger's attraction to a "continuum" view of the human-animal and human-nature relationship; and 3) how the Aristotle lectures prefigure *FCM*, his most sustained attempt at a philosophical biology.

Moreover, in this chapter I begin an argument that will be developed over the next four chapters. I submit that we can triangulate Heidegger's position on the ontological status of life by tracing the tension between the Kantian and Aristotelian strains in his work. On the one hand, Heidegger follows Kant in refraining from claiming teleology as a constitutive principle of living being and in eschewing a robust metaphysical biology; as I show in the next chapter, the Kantian strain begins to dominate in *Being and Time*. On the other hand, Heidegger sees Aristotle's understanding of motion as the crucial but forgotten breakthrough in ancient ontology, and this understanding not only informed his account of human existence, but led him to reject the Darwinian biology that Kant's endorsement of mechanism underwrote and to explore nonreductive approaches to living and animal being.

Aristotle's influence on Heidegger has been well documented. What has been less noted is the fact that his engagement with Aristotle involved the search for an ontology of life; life not only in the sense of the living, breathing, corporeal human being, but also in the broader sense of animate being as such. Indeed, it is commonly held that Heidegger's thought is inhospitable to life philosophy. Spirited declamations abound. Didier Franck: "The ecstatic determination of man's essence [by Heidegger] implies

## Life and Nature in *Being and Time*

Though nature appears to be a peripheral concept in *Being and Time*, I contend that it exerts a subtle pressure that both frustrates the work's completion and forces Heidegger to reformulate his project; moreover, it is no accident that the concept of life, set to the side at the start of the work, is never fully engaged, and is deferred until *FCM*. Heidegger approaches nature in the way he does for methodological reasons. The conceptions of nature proper to what Husserl called the natural and theoretical attitudes must be "bracketed" or held in abeyance. Heidegger suspends ontological assumptions about nature (and life) in order to clarify how the different senses of nature are founded on and arise out of the modes of human intentionality. Heidegger's sparse discussion of nature in *Being and Time* is found primarily in his analysis of human inauthenticity, our average, everyday way of going about our business and attending to our concerns. This analysis, however, is but a preparation for the pivotal second division in which he famously claims that Dasein's understanding of itself and its world is determined by its finite temporal structure and that the meaning of being, in all its permutations throughout the Western philosophical tradition, has been determined by an interpretation of time first put forth by Aristotle. Thus the conceptual link between being and time is the crux of the text. Nature appears to be ancillary.

One of Heidegger's interpretive principles is that in studying a text we can and should seek to bring to light the "unsaid," that is, what the author does not explicitly *say* but what covertly conditions and quietly pervades what *is said* throughout the work. Heidegger's marginalization of the question of nature in *Being and Time* can be seen as one such "unsaid" that erupts in his later works in the form of a philosophical biology, in 1929–30, and a new notion of earth and a focus on *physis* (the Greek word for nature), in the 1930s and '40s. Hence Heidegger's treatment of the question of nature can tell us much about the development of his thought and the

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## Back to Life

### *Organism, Animal, and Umwelt in Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*

Though Heidegger does challenge the domination of mechanistic materialism, link it to the phenomena of nihilism and anthropocentrism, and advance an alternative view of nature, a robust account of life is a serious lacuna in his oeuvre. As David Farrell Krell notes, “However much Heidegger inveighs against life philosophy his own [early] fundamental ontology and [later] poetics of being thrust him back onto [it] again and again.”<sup>1</sup> Heidegger’s difficult position on animal life has received much attention in recent scholarship. However, as Frank Schalow has recently pointed out, one of the “glaring omissions” in this scholarship is any regard for the place of evolutionary theory in Heidegger’s account of not only animals, but human beings and nature at large.<sup>2</sup> I am going to extend Schalow’s observation to show that one of the deepest problems in Heidegger’s view of life is his almost utter neglect of the question of evolution. Concerned that any capitulation to evolutionary theory would amount to a kind of biologism and a vindication of mechanistic materialism, Heidegger treated evolutionary theory as anathema. This is the same pattern we find in his position on values. In both cases, Heidegger excludes important concepts from his positive account of nature by assuming that *narrow* interpretations of them are the *only* interpretations possible: that evolution is necessarily reductionist and that values are inherently anthropocentric and blind to Being. I submit, however, that some integration of evolutionary and value theories is a necessary condition for an environmental ethic. Despite his critiques of modern forms of anthropocentrism and the Being-centric cast of his later thought, Heidegger’s exclusion of these concepts renders his philosophy anthropocentric by default—the sole imperative Being/*physis* offers

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## Nature in the Later Heidegger

*Earth, Physis, Technology, Machination, and Poetic Dwelling*

An examination of Heidegger's later thinking about nature is in order, given that most ecological readings of his thought draw on the later texts. In this chapter, I trace the arc of Heidegger's later account of nature through his work in the mid-1930s until the early 50s and focus on 1) his notion of earth, 2) his retrieval of the Greek concept of *physis*, 3) his critique of technology and machination, and 4) his prescription of poetic dwelling in the fourfold. Most of these themes are concerned with the elaboration of the third sense of nature ("primordial" or "poetic" nature) only scarcely sketched in *Being and Time*, and my exegeses are specifically intended to show how they are related to this third sense.

Many approaches to Heideggerian environmental thought see this increasing focus on nature as a sign that Heidegger became a non-anthropocentrist. In translating his critique of metaphysics into a more concrete, historical narrative—the so-called "history of being"—and by casting it in terms of the exploitation of nature, Heidegger appears to present himself as a protoenvironmentalist and a nonanthropocentrist. His paeans to poetry, musings on the mystery of the earth, and fascination with *physis* seem to signal a departure from a phenomenological approach to nature in general (the sense nature has for human intentionality) and the allegedly existentialist, anthropocentric slant of *Being and Time* in particular. On this view, Heidegger's turn is a turn toward nonanthropocentrism, or even biocentrism. As I detailed in the first chapter, this view is embraced by the early Zimmerman, Devall and Sessions in *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, and several others. I think this view is partly mistaken. Though several of Heidegger's later concepts—including his account of "the thing," his critique of cybernetics, the attitude of *Gelassenheit* or "letting things be,"

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## Nature and Nihilism

### *Heidegger's Confrontation with Nietzsche*

Picking up the trail of nihilism sketched in earlier chapters, here I examine Heidegger's view of nihilism as the logic of Western metaphysics, link it to his understanding of humanity's relation to nature, and compare it with Nietzsche's view of nihilism. At first, he sees Nietzsche's thought as the antidote to nihilism because of the latter's attacks on traditional metaphysics, idealism, and scientific naturalism, as well as Nietzsche's understanding of living being. Later on, however, Heidegger concludes that Nietzsche's thought—especially its call to naturalize and re-animalize human being—is the very essence of nihilism and must be overcome. Moreover, in opposing Nietzsche, Heidegger embraces an antinaturalist position at odds with the theoretical biology of his earlier thought.

I argue for the following cluster of claims. First, nihilism is one of the principal concerns of Heidegger's mature thought; his approach to the question of being aims to draw the problem of nothingness or nihilism into ontology proper. Second, his treatment of nihilism parallels his treatment of nature; while they are not explicitly engaged in his earlier thought, they come to play a prominent role in his middle and later thought. Third, the skeleton key to Heidegger's account of nihilism is his confrontation with Nietzsche's philosophy in the late 1930s; this is perhaps Heidegger's most important philosophical encounter. Fourth, Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche is mistaken because: a) in place of the more transcendental approach of fundamental ontology in *Being and Time*, Heidegger later adopts an implausible, idiosyncratic view of the "history of being" inspired largely by his own intellectual and cultural milieu; b) Heidegger wrongly interprets Nietzsche's views on the will to power, psychology, and value-theory anthropocentrically. Nietzsche's account of nihilism is genealogical,

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## Naturalizing Nietzsche

### *Life, Evolution, and Value*

In this chapter, I draw on ideas from Nietzsche's thought to develop the nonreductive naturalism sketched in Heidegger's earlier work on Aristotle and Uexküll and pursued by later phenomenological thinkers such as Hans Jonas and Evan Thompson. I focus on Nietzsche's view of living being, his incorporation of evolution, and his value theory. This kind of naturalism is "life affirming" in the sense that it recognizes life as an autonomous kind of being irreducible to physiochemical properties and mechanistic causality. It holds that humanity is continuous with animal life and subject to evolutionary forces yet resists the mechanistic, materialist interpretation of evolution. And finally, it rejects the value-free vision of nature found in modern science, holding that all living things value in some sense.

In the first section, I lay out some of the basic themes at play in interpreting Nietzsche naturalistically. There are a variety of views on whether and to what extent Nietzsche is a naturalist, so I begin by surveying the major positions and controversies.

In the second section, I lay out Nietzsche's naturalism by focusing on his view of biology. We have to begin with the biology because it is Nietzsche's point of entry for anchoring value in the natural world; it is by liberating biology from mechanism and recovering a nonmetaphysical form of teleology that we will attain an account of nature as value laden. In this section, I draw on several thinkers to help clarify and elaborate the nonreductive naturalism I have attempted to cull from Nietzsche and Heidegger. Hans Jonas offers an "existentialist interpretation of biological facts," a phenomenological naturalism that underwrote an ethic anchored in the natural world. In a similar fashion, Evan Thompson has recently put forth an ambitious theory of "mind in life," a synthesis of biology and phenomenology. Both thinkers argue stridently against materialism and offer

## Engaging Environmental Ethics

In this final chapter, I explain how the nonreductive naturalism intimated by Heidegger and Nietzsche might provide a conceptual foundation for environmental ethics. Most environmental thinkers would probably call themselves “naturalists”—but which kind of naturalism do they have in mind? If an environmental ethic bases its view of nature on the natural sciences—scientific naturalism—it is arguably seeking for values in a valueless world and is plagued by the problem of nihilism. A nonreductive naturalism attempts this problem by anchoring value in the natural world through a phenomenological account of the organism’s relation to its environment. Likewise, most contemporary phenomenologists would probably call themselves “realists”—but which kind of realism do they have in mind? I reject the agnostic posture toward metaphysics often struck by phenomenologists and hold that a nonreductive naturalism maintains a place for intentionality in the natural world. The vision intimated by Heidegger and Nietzsche (and Jonas and Thompson) reconstructs traditional views of nature as a great chain of being or *scala natura* but does so without speculative supports and in a way that is consistent with evolutionary biology. I submit that this view of nature might support a “hierarchical biocentrism,” which recognizes the value of all living things while maintaining that higher, more complex forms of life embody greater value.

Having situated Heidegger in relation to environmental ethics in the first chapter, here I address the problems and promise of drawing an environmental ethic out of Nietzsche’s version of naturalism. There has been relatively little debate about Nietzsche’s place in environmental ethics, but the lines of that debate are clearly marked.<sup>1</sup> He has been framed as an anthropocentrist (Zimmerman), a humanist (Acampora), a biocentrist and deep ecologist (Hallman), and an ecocentrist (Parkes). His position is hard to pinpoint, perhaps because he was writing before there was any environmental movement and had different concerns than many environmentalists.