

Arne Johan Vetlesen

*The Denial of Nature: Environmental Philosophy in the Era of Global Capitalism*

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Arne Johan Vetlesen's *The Denial of Nature* is a challenging and important work that brings into focus the psychological and cultural dimensions involved in our current environmental crisis. Central to the importance of Vetlesen's work are not only his diagnoses of the psychological and cultural aspects of our present crisis, but also his efforts to present solutions to these problems (or, at least, suggestions for moving towards such solutions).

Vetlesen's analysis critically engages and draws upon a few key figures from psychoanalysis (Melanie Klein), philosophical approaches to the latter (Teresa Brennan), critical theory (Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Jürgen Habermas), and environmental philosophy (Paul Taylor, J. Baird Callicott, Holmes Rolston III, Hans Jonas and Freya Mathews). In the introduction, Vetlesen justifies the need for engagement with psychoanalysis by noting that environmental philosophers, such as Callicott, who predicted the problem of destructive behavior towards the environment would largely be solved by improving knowledge and understanding of the problem, have not proven to be correct in that prediction. What has in fact happened, Vetlesen notes, is that at the same time and in the same places that understanding of the science has increased over the last twenty years (he notes his home country, Norway, as an example), certain behaviours that are destructive to the environment, such as the booking of holiday flights, have also increased (p. 8). Hence, Vetlesen infers, more and better knowledge of the science of the problem will not, *by itself*, be enough to solve the problem. While the example of increased holiday flights may itself be insufficient to prove the point, Vetlesen is right to infer that there is a need for further research and discussion on the cultural and psychological obstacles that impede the replacement of a destructive anthropocentric ethos with a restorative biocentric one (p. 114).

Turning to discussion of psychoanalysis in chapter 1, Vetlesen draws extensively from Brennan's discussion of the 'foundational fantasy' as a driving force among the social causes of our environmental crisis. The foundational fantasy, he explains, involves a psychologically common and destructive way of interpreting our dependence on others – on our mother as well as on our surrounding environment as a whole. The destructive hermeneutic that arises with the foundational fantasy starts from the mistaken assumption that we would be omnipotent (e.g., God) if it were not for the others (the mother and the surrounding environment) that we depend on, and this false assumption not only involves a kind of 'denial of nature', it leads to envy and aggression towards the others (both the mother and the surrounding environment) (p. 24). Further, when the fantasy is allowed to develop it facilitates the ego's justification of destructive behaviours towards the nonhuman environment as a whole. What is needed in order to counter-act this fantasy, he suggests (drawing from Brennan and Klein) is to re-orient the attitude of aggression towards the

fantasy itself (p. 42). Such re-orientation will involve, from early childhood education and on to adulthood, subverting false modern dichotomies between the individual and the environment, subject and object, and bringing into focus the (inter)dependence of the self on both human and nonhuman others (pp. 41, 47).

In chapter 2 Vetlesen addresses the problem of strong cultural resistance towards solutions to the environmental crisis stemming from a denial of nature which he traces back to a ‘nature deficit’ (p. 80) in theories of reason developed by twentieth-century critical theorists. While these critical theorists recognised the problems modern consumerist, capitalist culture poses to human value and self-understanding through the embrace of disposable products and monetisation as the universal standard of value, Vetlesen argues that they neglected the import of the manner in which consumerist, capitalist attitudes devalue nonhuman nature and justify its destruction. Among the critical theorists, it is in Habermas that the problem of the devaluation of nonhuman nature is most notable, Vetlesen claims. The devaluation of nature in critical theory has contributed, Vetlesen argues in chapter 4, to our cultural obsession with images and technology and to an ever-increasing and harmful abstraction from nature.

To counter the devaluation of nature discussed in chapter 2, in chapter 3 Vetlesen provides a concise summary of attempts by leading environmental philosophers to establish the intrinsic (or more than instrumental) value of nonhuman nature. Among the positions addressed, Vetlesen highlights Callicott’s Hume, Darwin and quantum physics influenced derivation of the intrinsic value of nature from the continuity of self and nature, as well as recognising the originality of Jonas’s philosophical biology of metabolism and exchange. However, he ultimately favours Rolston’s critical realist position, according to which nonhuman things have intrinsic value based on the role they play in the overall creative system of nature. Given the intrinsic value of nonhuman nature, Vetlesen argues, the continuation of consumerist, capitalist culture in its present form should worry us not only for its harmful effects on human personality, as critical theorists have shown, but also due to its destructive effects on nonhuman nature.

The solutions Vetlesen proposes are preliminary yet substantial and call for careful reading and further consideration. Here, a brief sketch will have to suffice and, I hope, will motivate readers to take a closer look at the text. First, Vetlesen argues that a holistic and structural approach is needed in tandem with changes in individual habits. We should focus less, he argues, on the ethical dynamics of one-to-one (human-to-nonhuman) relationships and more on holistic, ecological and interdisciplinary efforts. In support of prioritising a holistic approach, he raises the example of the Eurasian eagle owl in Norway – whose endangerment is due not to hunting but rather to a variety of factors including clear-cut logging, industrial agriculture expansion, housing development expansion, climate change and a general loss of prey species (p. 183). Hence, deep ecological understanding and corresponding political action are needed in order to effectively address the problem of habitat loss.

Second, in order to counter the cultural drift towards abstraction, Vetlesen advocates prioritising experiences in nature throughout the educational process. He argues that through such experiences, encounters with the nonhuman can cultivate relationships with nonhuman nature (which he links with Mathews' discussion of panpsychism) and thereby nurture recognition of our interdependence and subvert the drift towards abstraction.

While the psychological and cultural challenges involved in our environmental crisis are great, Vetlesen's insightful diagnosis along with his proposals for addressing it make an important contribution towards understanding and solving this crisis. I highly recommend this book for use in upper level undergraduate and graduate courses in environmental ethics, critical theory and cultural studies, as well as for individual readers with an interest in deepening their understanding of our environmental crisis and strategies for solving it.

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