

Arran Gare

*The Philosophical Foundations of Ecological Civilization: A Manifesto for the Future*

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In the 1990s, the Australian environmental philosopher Arran Gare published a series of books that drew together a rich array of ideas and conceptual resources to attempt an intellectual path forward beyond consumerist modernity and towards an ecologically sensitive future society. Two impressive and remarkably wide ranging works of cultural critique, *Nihilism Incorporated: European Civilization and Environmental Destruction* and *Beyond European Civilization: Marxism, Process Philosophy and the Environment* were published by him in 1993, then later synthesised into a single volume *Nihilism Inc.: Environmental Destruction and the Metaphysics of Sustainability* in 1996. In the interim, he published a much shorter outline of some of his key ideas, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* (1995), an engaging summary that invoked a combination of postmodernism with eco-Marxism within a metaphysical framework of process philosophy, but which rather let itself down with a hurried final chapter covering revamped nationalism as the final ingredient. Now, two decades on from those richly thoughtful volumes, Gare is back with the same intellectual motivation and a further set of reflections to fuel a self-declared manifesto. So what's new?

In essence, Gare claims that 'there are alternative ideas that have been and are being developed that are adequate to the crises that we are facing', but which need to be 'identified, integrated and further developed' in order that humanity may be mobilised 'to redefine its place in the cosmos and its destiny' and on this foundation 'to create a society that augments life and the current regime of the global ecosystem' (p. 4). This will demand 'a revival of speculative philosophy and the philosophy of nature', and so his book is 'a manifesto for "speculative naturalism" along with "speculative dialectics" as a condition for creating an ecological civilization' (p. 4), based on the assumption that 'philosophy, along with the humanities generally, has a crucial and indispensable role to play in revealing the deficiencies of our culture' (p. 5) and building alternative cultural foundations. Such radical rethinking is required, Gare maintains, to counter the nihilism being spread by the devaluation of the arts and humanities as well as by the reduction of scientific inquiry to techno-science, and to create meaningful democracy that is no longer controlled by the managers and technocrats of multinational corporations.

To these ends, the book is constructed through six chapters, plus a brief reflective conclusion ordered around a reconceptualised notion of 'Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness'. Chapter One outlines Gare's core contentions: not only is our ecological crisis the greatest threat

to the human species in its history, but our capabilities to recognise the threats, identify their roots and find meaningful alternatives are being undermined. The problem is not merely the prevalence of an anti-democratic form of international economic order, but the fact that the prime institutional locations for cultural critique and the wider intellectual backdrop of our societies have been subverted in ways that make nihilism pervasive and social alternatives hard to envision. Gare sees the problems as caused by a triumphant reductionist scientism, abetted by currently predominant forms of analytic and continental philosophy; these have meant philosophers ‘withdrawing from the quest for a comprehensive understanding of the world (which is essential to the quest for wisdom)’, thus leaving ‘the broader population without the means to orient themselves in this new world order’ and ‘powerless in the face of the mind-control industries of advertising and public relations’ (p. 19). Hence, in Gare’s view, the need for reconnecting to what he calls the Radical Enlightenment and reviving ‘the naturalistic form of speculative philosophy, defended by Friederich Schelling in his effort to forge a new synthesis of natural philosophy, art, and history’ inclined towards ‘a comprehensive understanding of the world and our place and significance within it’ (p. 26). In Chapter Two he expounds and explains his view of the history of modern philosophy and its eclipse of the speculative naturalist tradition, casting a particularly acerbic critical perspective on the contribution of W.V.O Quine, and elaborates on how Schelling’s distinctive variant of dialectics ‘was infused with willing’ and ‘characterised the whole of nature as a self-organising process’ (p. 61). This leads into Gare’s extended discussion of the Marxist and post-Marxist traditions of dialectics in Chapter Three. Here he covers a great deal of ground in a way that seems to me to be more scholarly yet less directly driven by clear philosophical purpose; I confess that I found this treatment rigorous enough, but still the least engaging chapter in the book. It does, however, set matters up quite nicely for Chapter Four, which deals in detail with the dialectics of speculative naturalism and goes some way to showing how Schelling’s variant of this naturalism connects to the process philosophy that Gare has championed elsewhere, as well as its impressive but little recognised historical pedigree. (How many knew that ‘Schelling’s notion of universal productivity ... inspired the postulation of the first law of thermodynamics, and Schelling anticipated systems theory, cybernetics, complexity theory and hierarchy theory’ [p. 127]? I didn’t). It is a pedigree and promise that is important in framing the bounds of inquiry, for part of Gare’s argument is that the reduction of scientific inquiry to techno-science is bad for the meaningful practice of science itself. Moreover, such reduction generates a situation in which both the natural and human sciences ‘are committed to explaining away not only consciousness, but life itself, as nothing but physical and chemical processes, supporting a debased view of humanity and life that legitimates greed as the driving force of the economy and of the evolution of nature, imposing thereby a fundamentally flawed model of reality on humanity’ (p. 144).

Accordingly, Chapter Five begins with an examination of the deleterious impacts of techno-science before invoking a reconnection to the Radical Enlightenment. Gare regards such a reconnection as partly manifested in the ‘social liberalism (or liberal socialism) of ...

pragmatists, process philosophers and humanistic Marxists' of the early twentieth century, which was "committed to liberty" and removing obstacles to people's self-realisation' (p. 158), but also, via speculative naturalism, as enabling 'a commitment to truth' that could underpin 'an environmental movement able to successfully challenge ... managerialist market fundamentalism, and create a new, global civilization' (p. 164). These reflections then lead us into Chapter Six, in which ecology is identified as 'the focal point for recovering and developing the tradition of speculative naturalism' (p. 178) and in which the revitalised humanities are invoked as the informing context for 'a political and ethical philosophy of eco-poiesis (home-making)' (p. 183). It is here that the manifesto proper takes off in political policy terms, with suggestions for market socialist transformations of certain property rights, educational and cultural policy, egalitarian orientated social justice and much else besides, allied to an eco-poiesis informed by the insights of Aldo Leopold, Alasdair MacIntyre and Christopher Alexander, amongst others in a strikingly rich mix.

Looking at the work overall, it is clear that the years have not dimmed Gare's breadth of interests or intellectual ambition. Though this book does not have quite the extraordinary range of 1996's *Nihilism Inc.*, it nonetheless outdoes *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* in depth and consistency, and constitutes further evidence of Gare's remarkable ability to transcend the academic myopia of ultra-specialisation which far too much contemporary environmental research manifests. It is an impressive, clearly targeted and far reaching philosophical work, and deserves a significant audience.

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