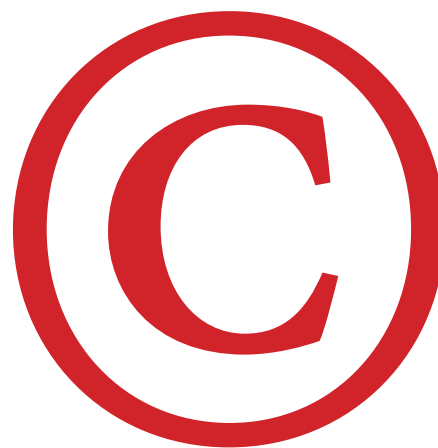


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BOOK REVIEWS

David Rothenberg, ed. *Wild Ideas*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. 225 pages.

We are accustomed to dividing twentieth-century Western philosophy into two camps: Anglo-American analytic and continental European phenomenology. Environmental philosophy, as a precipitate of this century, can also be considered by this heuristic. One group of ecophilosophers clarifies terms, analyzes concepts, and builds slews of metaphysical, epistemological, axiological, and normative theories. Another minority group, with a predilection for hermeneutics and aesthetics, endeavors to elucidate the features of human experience in nature. How are the connections between humans and the lifeworld known? In what ways do language and socially inculcated belief systems form our apprehension of the world around us?

David Rothenberg favors the latter approach. His recent book, *Wild Ideas* (an outgrowth of the Fifth World Wilderness Congress in Tromsø, Norway in 1993), is both an extension and a culmination of his philosophical project to date in at least three interrelated ways. First, for Rothenberg subjective experience is the starting point for environmental ethics. In the introduction to his translation/collaboration of Arne Naess's *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), he suggests that we are capable of understanding suprahuman nature "through various phenomenological approaches which can involve both the observer 'constructing his reality' and 'things presenting themselves'" (p. 20). Regard for nonhuman nature springs from the "structure of intentionality,*" coupling subject and object. This experiential bond is Rothenberg's point of departure: he is in the tunnels under Niagara Falls; with Arne Naess searching for elephant seals near Santa Cruz or drinking whiskey at Tvergastein; or waiting for a train in frenzied, storm-paralyzed Grand Central Station. In *Wild Ideas*, he travels the Arctic, skis on Mount Hood, and wanders through O'Hare airport or Olympic rain forest.

Second, good philosophy must relate theory to practice, a problem for the analytic method. Although Rothenberg has done his fair share of bifurcating, categorizing, and schematizing (and certainly considers such tasks important to the philosophical enterprise), he also sees hypertrophic analysis a plague for environmentalism. Why? It retards activism by fragmenting and factionalizing the very people who *care* about the Earth. Environmental philosophy, when constricted to disquisition, becomes uninteresting and impotent as a force for change. Rothenberg struggles against division and confrontation, groping instead for commonalty, synthesis, solution: "Take away wilderness as an opposition to civilization, think instead about the wild, and see if we can communicate. . . . We in the developed world must *change our way of life*" (p. xxi).

Third, Rothenberg insists on the semantic relativism and imprecision of environmental ethics' central concepts (viz., humanness, nature, intrinsic value, and so on)—a point Naess, Rothenberg's mentor, made more than once. His own intellectual evolution illustrates the polysemous character of the word *nature*. In his early deep ecology period, he looked upon "nature" as the independent aggregate of physical processes to which we must conform our purposes. Then Rothenberg began to discern the intimate codependence of ontology and technology: humankind defines itself through transforming nature via technology (or, to put it another way, technology defines nature, and nature defines technology, as nature is the context or class of things not manipulable by humans).

Lately, in *Wild Ideas* (as well as his impressive new journal, *Terra Nova*), Rothenberg has taken up Max Oelschlaeger and Neil Evernden's seminal thesis that *nature, environment, wilderness* is not some absolute, determinate, nonhuman *other*, but is itself an invention of civilization (p. xv; p. 213). Because *nature* is a cultural creation, there are multiple conceptions. But it is crucial to note that just because Rothenberg often dwells on the relativity of meaning, this does not imply he denies the larger-than-human is objectively real. True to the phenomenological method, knowledge is a function of both subjective intentions and external reality. As he says to himself snowshoeing in the Catskills, "I laugh at those writers sitting in heated rooms calling nature all a social construction. Haven't they ever been outside?" (*Terra Nova* 1, no. 4 [1996]: 3).

Thus Rothenberg's project, taken as a whole, can be accurately described as "phenomenology of nature." The practical result of Rothenberg's method suggests that environmental ethics must be polyglottal. Analytic philosophy has a voice, just not the only voice. Although he no longer uses the jargon, his new work is about different people articulating their individual "ecosophies" with an eye to stimulating dialogue and forging alliances. "I want to see new ways of celebrating and criticizing the looming presence of nature that have not given voice before. I want readers to be surprised and challenged, to be thrown together from different camps and asked to reckon with conflicting sides and irreconcilable views" (*Terra Nova* 1, no. 1 [1996]: 2).

Wild Ideas aims directly at this mark. It is comprised of thirteen essays, divided into four topic areas. The first "Whose Wild Idea?" is a sampling of current notions of wilderness. R. Edward Grumbine criticizes two prevalent competing views of wildlands—to preserve or manage?—and offers a third corrective. The goal of preserving wildlands is to learn to live within limits and use these lessons to model culture, i.e., "fewer humans demanding less" (p. 21). Writing from England, Denis Cosgrove argues that the idea of setting aside wilderness is a distinctly American concept; it provides the necessary foil for the resolution of American identity. The whole concept of *wilderness* is a legacy of European imperialism by providing something to colonize: savagery,

chaos, *un*-civilization. But when the West was won, another xenophobic social function ensued. Wilderness became the “breeding grounds for a particular type of American national character”: healthy, wealthy, white (pp. 36–37). Oelschlaeger, one of my favorite eco-iconoclasts, wonders if we have become alienated from the biosphere through the use of language, possibly the remedy lies in language too, or “earth-talk.” Discursive language conforms nature to language; in contrast, earth-talk conforms language to nature with the goal of allowing nature to disclose itself more fully (p. 51).

The second section, “Cross-Cultural Wild,” traces the notion of wilderness across cultural boundaries. Marvin Henberg cogently argues for the possibility of a pancultural notion of wilderness, similar to the notion of universal human rights. Even if one culture lacks a concept that another culture has (e.g., wilderness), it is not consequently a fiction; maybe the culture lacking the concept has not ‘discovered’ it, adopted it, or even needed it (p. 65). Lois Ann Lorentzen disagrees. In poor countries (her examples are India and El Salvador), women are in an ideal position to see the deleterious effects of agri-capitalism. Unlike Western environmentalists, they do not think in terms of civilization/wilderness dualisms but focus on the link between ecological integrity and sustenance (p. 79). Douglas J. Buege is concerned about the Inuit. He sketches a feminist moral theory so that they and we in the industrialized world can learn from each other, and assuage their plight.

“The Art of the Wild,” the third section, provides different attempts at expressing the essence of wildness. Like ecologist Frank Golley, David Abram considers the human body an ecosystem, “a magic webwork of reciprocities and cyclical relations between diverse symbiotic entities . . . all engaged in an ecstatic, improvisation dance” (p. 97). In the wildest essay of the book, he interprets a personal experience, concluding that time and space are not discrete dimensions. Rather, time metamorphoses *into* space. Irene Klaver continues the phenomenological spirit, suggesting the border separating nature and civilization should remain elastic and porous, letting wildness flow freely between: “Wildness is as vital for the self as for the other” (p. 123). Rothenberg, wanting to “make philosophy itself more like an ice floe, more lyric than analytic” (p. xxv), maintains wildness is everywhere, yet is most starkly exposed in some peculiar way in the extreme latitudes. R. Murray Schafer, a “sonic environmentalist,” vividly describes a musical designed to be performed at a mountain lake. Given the unpredictability and capriciousness of mountain weather, the play is of “first nights only” (p. 153). I look forward to seeing it.

Section four, “The Wild Revised,” confronts the issue of what kinds of notions of wildness can direct public policy in the future. Tom Wolf contemplates the prospect for large predators in the Sangre de Cristos, and Robert Greenway attests to the benefits of applying lessons from wilderness experiences to our daily lives. Andrew Light’s thesis, though in the spirit of analytic social philosophy, sounds like it could have been argued by a French poststructuralist:

humans need some “cognitive space” or boundary to epistemically mark of an “other” for the purposes of defining “self.” *Wilderness* is the space necessary in defining *civilization*, a space which is politically-determined and meaning constantly in flux.

In my estimation, *Wild Ideas* makes an important contribution to environmental ethics because it reminds us what all this talk of anthropocentrism, intrinsic value, and duties to nonhumans is all about: *Homo sapiens living on Earth*. Reading the book prompted me to reflect on the reasons for my interest in the field, that is, witnessing the continued defilement of the redrock deserts and mountains of Utah, land to which my identity is closely connected.

Wild Ideas is an eclectic book, mixing phenomenology, feminism, anthropology, geography, semantics, psychology, social philosophy, theater, and more. Despite the unavoidable glitches of any such collection (e.g. Oelschlaeger’s essay could have just as well been in part three), Rothenberg succeeds in weaving one thematic thread through thirteen patches of extraordinarily different fabric. As in his previous books, Rothenberg has sprinkled *Wild Ideas* with interesting pictures. Overall it is beautifully put together and has a gestalt most philosophy books lack.

My positive critique notwithstanding, it is not the kind of book that I would use in my environmental ethics course. Many of the essays are too esoteric to clarify basic theories of the subject. (While one could enjoy Abram’s piece without understanding much of it, I don’t see how anyone who has not spent a lot of time reading Heidegger could get anything out of it, and my students have not spent a lot of time—*yet*—reading Heidegger!) Rather, it is a good book to give a bright and literary friend who is interested in environmental studies, but *not* interested in philosophical theory-building. One such friend of mine already has a copy, a good-luck mojo for his lengthy loop through the Pacific northwest. It is a traveling book, and will not likely remain in a pristine state for long. My copy is already tattered and coffee-stained. Put this one in your backpack and bring it along on your journeys.

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