

ANTHONY PAUL SMITH, *A NON-PHILOSOPHICAL THEORY OF NATURE: ECOLOGIES OF THOUGHT* (PALGRAVE 2013)

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Some preliminaries: this is a difficult book, and I cannot hope to address the full range of Smith's interests. What I hope to do is provide some reasons why you ought to read this book. To conclude before I begin: if you are wondering whether it is worth the price of admission to read Smith's contribution to thinking, then my answer is a firm yes.

Smith's ontology, that "what is, is natural," addresses the most difficult thought of contemporary continental philosophy and philosophical theology: immanence (1). In our post-Deleuzian landscape, immanence has replaced being and alterity/difference as the elusive 'x.' The 'x' guides our thinking, the thought before our thoughts, and yet we struggle to name it definitively. What is usually known is what immanence is not and Smith is here in agreement with the continental community that neither the transcendent nor the reductive are the means to think it. Another 'x' is Nature, and Smith is also keen to stress that immanence does not entail the abandonment of Nature, as we find in influential theorists such as Latour, Morton, and Žižek. Nature does exist, and within it ideas *about* nature exist. How to think this? A more Smithean question would be to ask what work we should undertake to do this.

One method is to present nature as perverse (5). This perversity is linked to the impossibility of capturing nature within any of the disparate fields that might lay claim to completely answering the question, what is nature? Smith's vision is to see forms of thinking such that each one represents an "ecosystem" (5). Seen as such, they each could be said to contribute to our grasp of nature without either one or all of them exhausting it.

His focus is on philosophy, theology and scientific ecology with the first two occasionally blending together as philosophical theology. These are split into tendencies he calls the "subsumption" and the "bonded" type (5). Philosophical subsumption entails the tendency to think *for* science, and philosophical bonding is the polar desire to become one *with* science. Theological subsumption is close to its philosophical cousin, but it has two sub-divisions. There is a "declension" type where science comes to represent an extreme example of

“fallenness” and an “inflection” type where insights from the sciences concerning crises are accepted, but are considered to be resolvable only by returning to a form of life distinct from the scientific image (6).

These approaches can, to radically simplify, all be said to lose sight of the positives of the sciences through their opposition to naturalism/materialism, or to fall into an overexcited naturalistic or materialistic veneration of the hard sciences. Part I neatly demonstrates the ‘speaking past one another’ characteristic of discussions that take place between ecological thinkers, (eco-)philosophers and (eco-)theologians. Especially rich is Smith’s brief, but comprehensive history of ecological thought that covers, to provide just a sample, its origins in Muir and Leopold, the emergence of deep ecology with Naess, eco-phenomenology, its various images (cybernetic, Gaia), and much more besides. Both philosophy and theology are also given conceptual histories of their engagements with ecology. What emerges clearly from Part I is the realisation that subsumption and bonded inclinations often result in shallow engagements with scientific ecology and flowering from this is the consistent re-assertion of the priority of philosophical or theological ground. Smith’s question is whether there is a blockage here that makes it structurally impossible for these “ecosystems (of) thought” to think alongside rather than through scientific ecology (55).

The most difficult part of the book is Part II since it is the section devoted to explicating Laruelle’s non-philosophy. Smith performs this unenviable task with elegance. The reason he draws on non-philosophy is clear: it downplays the battlefield of ideas meme that runs through the philosophical tradition. This does invite methodological quandaries. Since non-philosophy emphasises performativity over, to use shorthand, normative argumentation the question of arbitrariness hangs over it. Smith argues that Laruelle’s lesson is that, in spite of the competing claims to truth on display in the battlefield for ideas, it is nonetheless clear that many forms of thinking seem to *function* (59). They work at expressing something about their niche despite the fact that, from the perspective adopted in a neighbouring niche, they should not be capable of doing so. Non-philosophy is content to sacrifice assurance concerning ground, which to it is always a hallucination, in favour of methodological neutralisation or democratisation.

I would wager that, in spite of this, non-philosophy will never escape being involved in some skirmishes. This is perhaps the most fundamental tension operative in the text: non-philosophy promises liberation and a message of peace but one is always asked to first see their approach as wrongheaded. It’s true, you may learn to see it as a non-binding material replete with insight, but at what cost? That, however, seems to be a fair challenge to those philosophies aiming at quite stringent conditions as to what philosophy ought to be. The critique of philosophy itself is familiar. Laruelle identifies an invariant structure of philosophical decision, too complex to elucidate here, and to escape this ceaseless procedure – belonging to *all* forms of philosophy – we posit the “absolute autonomy of the Real” and think *from* it rather than aim to envelope it (64). This would then allow philosophy to escape its obsession with firstness and following this, the desire to ground other forms of thought.

Smith is clearly aware that the axiomatic postulation of the Real will continue to frustrate the acceptance of non-philosophy (70). Although there is a mention here of ‘practise’, in opposition to argument, I really do believe that non-philosophers will need to find ways to persuade sceptics beyond this appeal (71). I have in mind not the critics who get their kicks from undermining other positions, but readers who may find much to like in non-philosophy, but are not willing to take the Real at Laruelle’s word. One possible angle supplied by Smith is to realise that non-philosophy allows for a ‘mutation’ of philosophy such that we are faced with a flattened field of knowledge where other forms of knowledge can be applied to seemingly insoluble philosophical dilemmas (90). Given the tendency of philosophers to assume only internal methods can claim to have the last word on such matters this is a liberating posture.

Accepting Laruelle’s critique of philosophical decision Smith then embraces the non-philosophical approach of “philo-fiction” (73). Modelled on Laruelle’s most recent phase, which has quantum mechanics as its philo-fictional content, Smith takes up scientific ecology as his. In Part III he intensifies this approach with a careful mutation of philosophy *and* theology through a series of concepts taken from ecological science. These are

ecosystem, biodiversity, niche, exchange of matter and energy, space and time, and resilience (127-155). As he is right to remind us scientific ecology already *thinks*. The application of ecological concepts occurs alongside a re-unification with philosophical theology wherein Nature returns as a name for the Real, but is now perverse, un-encompassable, and resistant (157).

The conclusion of the book resists capture in a book review. Toward the end, chiefly in Part IV, Smith discovers in a mutated theology, a non-theology, the possibility of a creaturely piety. He begins by tackling the philosophical positing of the “World,” as found in thinkers such as Heidegger, and exposes its hallucinatory force within disciplines desiring self-sufficiency (175). This is not undertaken in a combative manner, and the process involves exposing that desire and then reintegrating insights subtracted from the grip of the hallucination. In many ways, he offers an escape route from the demand of sufficiency and ground.

This is not to suggest Smith finds in nature any kind of easy solace. There is recognition that nature is a site of constant suffering. He neatly evades covering this over with either a celebratory vitalism or nihilistic lapsing into the peace of death. Ultimately the core dialectical move of the text occurs when Smith performs scientific ecological thinking as a material capable of thinking nature immanently such that the resources of philosophical theology might retroactively be put to use to thinking (from) the Real.

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