

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **Ecology: Welcome Home**

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The first part of this volume, composed by Algis Mickūnas, is not concerned with ecological issues studied in biology, geology, sociology, and political science, but instead with philosophical issues. It is concerned with the kinds of being contained in our environment, and the ways of knowing and acting upon our “lifeworld,” that is, the environment we perceive and in which we rest, move, manipulate things, and sink into erotic and aesthetic enjoyment of elements, things, and events.

Theoretical elaborations and their practical and technological operations continually transform our environment, sometimes destructively, sometimes transforming our perception and active involvement with our environment. This book is not only descriptive and analytic, but also polemic. It elaborates arguments against other philosophical-ontological accounts of our environment, and it also criticizes what is destructive in modern theoretical accounts and technological transformations—what affects our living in the environment negatively.

Mickūnas alternates between penetrating phenomenological observation of specific entities, events, and dimensions, and meticulous deconstruction of theoretical accounts of them. Mickūnas introduces a study of the lived body—the human body in action and as perceived—whose positions, movements, and gestures are aligned with the dimensions of the environment and articulate and reveal things and events. He explains how thought—insight, recognition, and appraisal—arises from and elaborates the exploratory movements of the body.

The positions, movements, and gestures of a living human body refer to objects and situations of the environment and are expressive. Mickūnas argues that perceptions of expressive moves are primary, given in perception and not decomposable into physical data and psychic elements projected into them. The orientation and drive toward another expressive body is more than cognitive; it is erotic. The erotic drive, unlike need, does not end in satisfaction, but extends further such that the whole environment is encompassed by erotic desire and pleasure. He elaborates an extensive explication and mapping of eroticism, including a study of eroticism in Hindu cosmology.

Mickūnas addresses the dimensions and depths from which things and events emerge and into which they sink. He specifies the distinctive awareness of these depths in time and in space, offering an exposition of specifically aesthetic perception and of the aesthetic production that brings forth the emergence of substances and forms. The objects of perception are intersensorial and emerge with connections throughout the spatiotemporal field in which we live. He explores these phenomena with subtle and penetrating observations.

Mickūnas begins by recovering the conceptions of rural populations in Europe and elsewhere, of those who lived in and interacted with the natural environment (“pagan,” from Latin *paganus* = rural, rustic), setting aside the pragmatic functions of ritual and envisioning ritual as the primary articulation of the cosmos. For example, he traces the cosmic conceptions in Lithuanian folk songs and studies the subtleties of the Lithuanian language, which contains the forms of the ancient Indo-European language. He also cites a large number of terms in European, Middle Eastern, Hindu, and Chinese languages that function not to name entities, but instead to reveal and designate the fundamental cosmic dimensions. Such terms are not articulations of theoretical concepts but are ritual vocalizations, rhythmic vocalizations that capture and designate not cosmic structures, but cosmic dimensions and rhythms. They structure the narratives of myths.

For the primary elaboration of experience in the environment, Mickūnas also invokes popular music and literature—Melville, Mishima, Zola. And he inserts a long exposition of some central concepts in Zen Buddhism, with some references to Taoist and Hindu writers. The result is an explanation of the distinctive kind of awareness of the world conceived and practiced by these thinkers and taken to be fundamental. Mickūnas advocates Zen conceptions and takes this awareness to be opposed to all modern Western conceptions.

Mickūnas examines the impoverishment and alienation of our perceived environment in Western philosophy. He elaborates extensive critiques of their conceptions and their consequences.

The scientific ecological disciplines have revealed the massive destructive effects of many industrial practices—destruction of natural ecosystems, water and air pollution, soil degradation, climate change, the extinction of species. The findings of biological ecology have consequences in genetics, biochemistry, medicine, agriculture, sociology, and political policy. Efforts are in effect to reduce water and air pollution, to reduce economic growth, to develop more efficient technologies, and to decrease consumption.

In Part Two of this book, Žilvinas Svigaris argues that these correctives require breaking the bond of personal identity with consumption as well as the bond of happiness with consumption; promoting institutional and not merely individual responsibility; and developing forms of thinking not equivalent to data processing. These topics extend beyond the field studied by biological ecology. These are specifically philosophical issues.

The vague concept of happiness as the goal of human life has to be deconstructed into its divergent strands. And the isolation of one conception of happiness and its valuation is a philosophical endeavor. Quantitative observation and formulas do not adequately grasp and understand the connections and interrelationships of ecosystems. Svigaris devotes much of his work to identifying the specific kind of understanding that living systems require, distinguishing intuition and empathy from the scientific observation of nature. Intuition, as Bergson understood it, is life’s inner awareness of itself. And empathy and sympathy provide one living being contact with the pulse of life in another. “Meaningfulness is proportional to vulnerability,” Svigaris writes. “The more open a person is, the more empathic connections

he or she creates with other community members, the more meaningful he or she feels, and the more vulnerable he or she becomes.” These mental capacities provide one with the evidence of other living beings, and of the ecosystem as a multiplicity of living beings aware of and interacting with one another. Svigaris argues for the function and the primacy of the affective in the constitution of society. Empathy, he argues, is more fundamental than mutual protection and practical cooperation for the institution of social bonds.

Two authors provide Svigaris with explicit research into two kinds of understanding: neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor and psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung studied the distinction and interaction between logical rationality and intuitive-empathetic understanding. Taylor was a neuroscientist who at the age of thirty-seven suffered a massive stroke. During her eight-year recovery, she wrote an intimate account of the alteration of her mental life. Jung suffered a crisis after which he focused his writing on the second form of mental life. Svigaris also reviews other thinkers studying the origins and development of fetuses and of species with theories of collective memory, the morphogenetic field, and morphic resonance.

Svigaris works to identify the cognitive processes he, after Bergson, calls intuition and empathy, with analyses by Heidegger, Jung, Gebser, Nietzsche, Dilthey, and Campbell. All these thinkers worked to describe forms of understanding separate from the quantitative observations, classifications, and theories of the sciences. Dilthey, for example, describes the understanding that comes about from getting into another person’s being, into his or her historical context and life circumstances.

Before the constitution of scientific discourse, there was the discourse we call mythic. Such discourse formulated much knowledge of the environment in which peoples lived, and did so with a distinctive rationality. Key terms were not abstract but concrete categories. And the meaningfulness of terms was in part conveyed by the rhythm and tonality of words—by their musicality, for myths were typically conveyed in chants. Svigaris argues that mythic discourses contain the intuitions and empathies that communicate life in persons and things. He explains what the myths and ritual concepts are, what rhyme and musicality do. “Poetry brings language to its limits,” Svigaris writes, “forces one to be confused, overcome banal attitudes, reject tired clichés, cross the threshold of daily life, and enter the unknown experience of surprise.” Svigaris examines some pre-Socratic texts that include mythic understanding, and he also explains some forms of understanding elaborated in Zen and Taoism.

The elaboration of forms of understanding appropriate to the ecosystems in which humans live shapes the ethical values and norms. Svigaris emphasizes the distorted ethical values, starting with the equation of personal identity and happiness with consumption that depends on an essential misconception of ecology. He demonstrates that philosophical theses are implicated in their work and shape their results.



This volume contains a rich panoply of concrete examples and original phenomenological expositions. The book is an original and lucid contribution to the understanding of the critical ecological destruction we are witnessing.

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