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Heresy and Perversity: (New) Ecological Materials for Thought
A Review Essay of Anthony Paul Smith's Ecologies of Thought

Anthony Paul Smith, *A Non-Philosophical Theory of Nature: Ecologies of Thought*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 292 pp., \$35.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9781137544230.

Anthony Paul Smith's *A Non-Philosophical Theory of Nature: Ecologies of Thought* is just the kind of productive material we need for shaking the foundations of philosophy, theology, and our common notions about humanity's relation to nature. Readers of this text will be challenged, but with a challenge well worth enduring. While this reviewer cannot do justice to the originality and complexity of *Ecologies of Thought*, I do hope that my colleagues will treat this review as a voice calling out "pick up and read."

Smith is a prophet, not as the fortuneteller, but as one who diagnoses the present, critiques what appears as given, and calls into question the potential consequences of our current *ethos*. He claims that his goal is to foster a democracy (of) thought of which various materials are pulled together, each respected in its own right and placed in conversation with others in order to better understand the Real. Instead of laying out a program or blueprint for how to resolve our ecological emergency, Smith outlines a litmus test for how thought can be ecological and how such ecological thinking can generate a theory of nature that is neither transcendentalist nor reductive as naturalism or materialism. His own theory of nature is partially a non-theological theory influenced by the often enigmatic non-philosophy of François Laruelle.

It should be pointed out that non-philosophy and non-theology do not mean the negation or lack of philosophy and theology. Akin to non-Euclidean geometry, non-philosophy and non-theology might be better understood as non-standard philosophy and non-standard theology. These terms imply operations that differ from philosophy and theology as usual; they imply different kinds of thinking philosophically and theologically according to different axioms. Each kind of thought, for Smith, represents a regional knowledge, that is, an ecosystem.

Smith begins *Ecologies of Thought* with a consideration of how both standard philosophy and theology have related to scientific ecology. Nature is perverse, Smith claims, and philosophers and theologians alike have failed to realize that nature exceeds the thought of any one particular discourse. Indeed, they do not "allow scientific ecology to infect and mutate their own thinking about their own thinking, [it is this failure] that lies behind their

remaining unecological in thinking nature” (13). But Smith is not dismissive of standard discourses of philosophy and theology *tout court*; rather, Smith takes them to be ecological materials useful for aiding in the construction of a theory of nature. In the opening chapter, Smith imagines a typology for relations between philosophy, theology, and ecology. Philosophical thinking about nature, including ecophenomenology, environmental philosophy, and the more recent philosophies of nature, falls into one of two camps, namely the subsumption camp that tries to have philosophy think on behalf of science, to subsume science into epistemology, and the bonded camp that tries to think alongside ecology but only to serve its own standard operations. Both camps fail to engross themselves with ecology in a way that is itself ecological. According to Smith, all theological positions ultimately fall into the subsumption camp since theology tries to unify all the truth claims under—and relate all things to—the divine. Within this camp, some theologies of nature represent the declension type, that is, theological thinking that criticizes science for its secularity and involvement in the degradation of the earth. Other theologies might be described as inflections, in other words, as theologies that try to form a kind of symbiosis between theology and ecology, which without fail, present themselves as anthropocentric musings.

In the next few chapters, Smith provides a conceptual history of ecological thought. It is something of a tour through the hall of fame of the most influential thinkers of nature—scientists, philosophers, and theologians who have attempted to make nature a central concern of their regional knowledges or ecosystems. Anyone needing a survey of ecological thought will benefit from these pages. Smith begins with Arthur Tansley’s introduction of the ecosystem concept and proceeds to follow Daniel Botkin’s five images of nature: nature as divine order, nature as fellow creature or superorganism, nature as great machine, nature as computer, and nature as life-support system. He puts John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and later Arne Naess in conversation with Edmund Husserl and the more recent celebrities, namely, Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Quentin Meillassoux, and Slavoj Žižek. Represented by Michael Northcott (declension) and Sallie McFague (inflection), ecotheology, which resists the tendency to parse the metaphysical from the ethical, brings Smith’s comprehensive history to a close.

The typology and history is only momentarily set aside in the second part of the book, which serves as an introduction to the work of François Laruelle. Smith is known for translating several of Laruelle’s works and for being one of the premier interpreters of Laruelle in the Anglophone world. Those who have read Laruelle know that neither task is easy; and yet, Smith makes Laruelle’s non-philosophy accessible to the neophyte. Laruelle ultimately tries to bring about a democracy (of) thought—a thought that is simultaneously both democracy and thought. This means that the various regional knowledges or disciplines are regarded as useful materials in the cultivation of a democracy (of) thought. What Laruelle calls “the philosophical decision” is a practice within standard philosophy that, in contrast to this democracy, forces one to make arbitrary choices about what is properly philosophy. Philosophers treat their discipline as if it has absolute autonomy and, as such, can demarcate what is and is not philosophy. From the perch of non-philosophy, one can see this as a limitation of philosophy.

Philosophy has only relative autonomy in relation to the Real. No one discipline has an absolute ground; there is no guaranteed *a priori* certainty. And neither is there any fully objective universalizable perspective upon which certainty can be established. Of course, this flies in the face of much of what goes by the name philosophy and considers itself self-

sufficient. The idea that all things might be philosophizable, that all things can be unified into one system of thought, is what Laruelle calls “the principle of sufficient philosophy.” This principle names the attempt of standard philosophy to see itself set above all of existence, to treat itself as if it has an oracular voice. “Laruelle,” Smith writes, “aims to make all philosophies equivalent, to take up a scientific posture toward philosophy, in order to leave the war between philosophers, using them as simple material in an autonomous exercise that is thought from the Real” (69). Non-philosophy is itself a practice, a way of doing things. It gives us a philo-fiction about the way various disciplines *vis-à-vis* their materiality function as resources for thought. Take philosophy for example. Laruelle is not concerned with affirming specific philosophies in their entirety. Rather, he wants to use pieces of philosophies. Non-philosophy proceeds to think from out of the Real instead of trying to contain, or think about, the Real as is done in standard philosophy. Perhaps this is best understood by considering the various stages or waves of Laruelle’s non-philosophy.

Laruelle describes the development of non-philosophy in terms of waves—each wave characterized by a different set of materials and axioms. Laruelle refers to each of the five waves as “Philosophy N,” that is, “Philosophy I,” Philosophy II,” and so forth. In Philosophy I (1971-1981), Laruelle discovered the principle of sufficient philosophy by working on the history of philosophy. In Philosophy II (1981-1995), Laruelle ceased to operate within the conditions of philosophical self-sufficiency, flipped the hierarchy of philosophy, and attempted to bring philosophy back to a focus on the Real-One in place of its obsessions with being and alterity. Laruelle’s positive project began to emerge in Philosophy III (1995-2002), which was characterized by its unified theory of *philosophia* and *scientia*. This is not, however, a unity. Both retain relative autonomy. There is a unilateral equality among the disciplines insofar as thought itself is democratic. Also in Philosophy III, Laruelle developed the concept of force (of) thought, whereby it is viewed as alien, as stranger “from outside of the philosophical situation, that is to say from outside of the structure determined by the philosophical decision, and in so doing provides an occasional solution to certain problems in philosophy” (79). In Philosophy IV (2002-2008), Laruelle moved his queries elsewhere, namely, to politics, religion, and aesthetics. Whatever discussions of philosophy arose in this wave were focused on how philosophy is a question for itself and how philosophy manifests itself in the lived experience of human life. And finally, we are presently in the midst of Laruelle’s Philosophy V (2008-present). In this most recent wave, Laruelle is concerned with, among other things, the generic, which holds without synthesis the duality of the particular and the universal. Non-philosophy, or what becomes known as non-standard philosophy “uses material from science [particularly quantum physics] alongside of the productive powers of philosophy to produce generic [that is, non-universalizable] spaces that reject marginality, hierarchy, all other forms of transcendent judgment against the human as Real” (81). Where Laruelle placed philosophy under the conditions of quantum physics, Smith wants to do the same with philosophical theology and scientific ecology in hopes of creating new modes of ecological thought “that will add to knowledge a unified metaphysical ethics” suitable to the conclusions of ecology (94). In other words, both Laruelle and Smith strive to produce new ecosystems of thought.

Scientific ecology already has been thinking philosophically and theologically. In fact, philosophy and theology indeed are always already conditioned ecologically. There is no position from the outside. In the third part of the book, Smith develops an immanent ecology. But, before describing Smith’s ideas, I want to briefly turn to how he sets things up in contrast to Timothy Morton, Bruno Latour, and, to a much lesser degree, Laruelle. There is a tendency in Laruelle to lean toward anthropocentrism (104) or perhaps humanism (120-

123). To be fair, which Smith is, Laruelle, on the one hand, only raises the theme of ecology twice. Latour and Morton, on the other hand, have made nature a major theme in their works. Both authors attempt to think philosophically about ecology and conclude, albeit in different ways, that we ought to leave aside the concept of nature. For Latour, this implies that we ought instead to be talking about political ecology given that, Latour claims, nature is produced from political divisions and does not have any reality in itself and for itself. For Morton, ecology is already without nature, “the idea of [which] covers over the truth of the flux of living beings and provides a kind of anchor of meaning;” ecology has no need of this secular god (162).

Thinking in the register of scientific ecology, Smith explores the conceptual elements of an ecosystem, which is but an expression of nature. An ecosystem is a duality: the discrete unit—the organ of determinism—while simultaneously the dynamic flow—the wave of organicism. The drive to diversification of populations in an ecosystem is called biodiversity and the *ergon* of this is understood as niche—“that place [...] where an organism can find enough energy to continue to live while passing its genetic information” (137). This is not a matter of scale or population size; rather, it is about the width of conditions for flourishing. Ecosystems are not only comprised of the living and the dead, bacteria and stones. They also are composed of the never-living, the exchange of matter and energy. Ecosystems are also conditioned by their spatial, planetary locale in relation to the sun’s energy flows. Like space, time is also heterogeneous: trophic levels of species vary. The last element is that of resilience, which is the ability of an ecosystem to have multiple stable states. Moreover, ecosystems move through what are called adaptive cycles—phases of “rapid growth, conservation, release, and reorganization” (153). Each of these ecological elements highlights the degree to which ecosystems cannot be reduced to their isolated component parts nor can their wholeness be understood as stable and homogenous.

In the fourth and final part of the book, which is where we get Smith’s most original contribution, Smith explores his notion of immanent ecology—the unified theory of ecology and philosophical theology. In this part, we see Smith’s own theory of nature, which has the underlying assumption that nature is perverse and can never be fully thought. No single regional knowledge can fully account for nature, but neither can the aggregate of all regional knowledges (as if this were possible). So, Smith seeks to humbly think ecologically about the history of philosophy and theology, about these two as materials for thought, in order to demonstrate a unified theory “that does not aim to master nature, but to show how nature can function in thought in different ways” (170). Smith claims that the metaphysical concept of World has held a privileged status in the history of philosophy and, most recently and illustratively, in Martin Heidegger and Alain Badiou. Theology is served here by Aquinas’s *analogia entis* in contrast with Spinozist philosophies of immanence as well as Islamic Ismaili thinkers Abu Yaq’ub al-Sijistani and Nasir al-Din al-Tusi and their conception of the Oneness of nature that precedes both being and alterity. Faithfulness or piety requires that we think beyond standard thought, more specifically, that we think of nature free from being. Smith writes, “For the Ismaili as for the non-philosopher, the act of infidelity is to cover up that upon which thought runs aground, it is to stop thinking at the limits of thought, even to simply accept the absolute or divinity” (224). In the case of the Ismaili theorists, nature is understood as the condition for appearances, be they messianic divine potentialities or epistemological dialectics. In other words, the Ismaili conception of nature is akin to non-philosophy’s conception of the One. I also think it is worth noting the way in which Smith employs sources beyond the scope of the mainstream canon of Western philosophy and theology. His gesture toward Ismaili Islamic thought, while brief,

demonstrates how non-philosophy productively employs materials, in this case, proto-non-theological materials.

Concluding the book, Smith outlines the tripartite structure of his theory of nature. On one side, there is the creatural as subject of nature that breaks out of the assumptions of naturalism by continually and creatively exceeding the fixity of laws of nature and metaphysical rules. “The creatural as subject,” Smith writes, “is expressed in the ecological concepts of niche and biodiversity. For each of these is a fiction, or what Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze call a fabulation, a kind of story as effect of the One that produces Being and Alterity” (219). On the next, the chimerical identity of God or nature as non-thetic transcendence of nature reveals how naturalism and its hypostasized notion of nature are productions of immanence. Positivism fails to see its own assumptions and its already being conditioned ecologically. On the third, the One as radical immanence of nature appears as the antidote to both the bonded and subsumption types of philosophy and theology. Smith writes, “For as a creatural body I am a certain ecological organization of matter and energy,” that is, we as our bodies experience nature, “and yet, in the immediacy of practice and experience, [we] don’t take this transcending ailment [e.g., “like gout {that} suddenly come{s} upon {one’s} body”] as a parameter set by Nature” (223). In summation, nature, which “has become a problem for nature,” is one that speaks truth to the violence of worldly Nature (123). Nature is perverse: “new species come into existence” and exceed the work of Nature (139).

Smith demonstrates a proper piety—one that reproaches the piety of standard philosophy and theology. What follows is not so much my criticism of Smith’s text, but rather material for further thought. Throughout my reading of *Ecologies of Thought*, I thought of several points of convergence with pragmatism, especially as presented by William James. There may be different metaphysical underpinnings between Laruelle/Smith and James but their methods of using materials are akin to one another. In working toward a democracy (of) thought, Smith sees regional knowledges as forms of thought that function. What matters is not some fundamental grounding of certainty but the ability to be productive. For James, there is no final theory—no theory of everything under which all regional knowledges can be unified. In fact all theories are unverifiable. Thought, which produces theory, is inherently practical; it must test itself against the vicissitudes of the external world.

In short, truth is what works. And to work means to produce useful consequences for navigating life. Which theories or truth claims work best? The answer is in the democratic nature of pragmatism. In other words, pragmatism claims that we have no access to the whole (the Real) and that all truth claims are perspectival. We only understand reality by standing within it, each of us occupying a particular space. We need dialogue with others to have more access to the whole, which always exceeds the aggregate of perspectives. Does the following hold true for pragmatism? “This philosophical faith in philosophy fosters a sense of philosophical self-sufficiency, named the ‘principle of sufficient philosophy’ by Laruelle and meaning that ‘everything is philosophizable’” (64). I do not think so. The pragmatist knows that we are in the midst of things, that there is no philosophical position “above the dangerous ocean” (120). Pragmatist philosophy is willing to grant that there are different registers for thinking and different regional knowledges and that the one speaking does so from within the conditions of that ecosystem. More so, pragmatism embraces the use of philo-fiction.

Non-philosophy grants every particular philosophy its *raison d’être*, not in terms of relativism, but each as relatively autonomous before the Real (i.e., in terms of a non-philosophical Realism). Smith claims that “the Real is pragmatically asserted through a

variety of axioms” (71). If I may blend our two theories, I would claim that James describes pragmatism as a new ecosystem of thought that views regional knowledges as being unilaterally equal insofar as they are each productive in using their axioms to produce truths about the Real. These truths then need to be tested for their usefulness. Smith’s words, I have no doubt, could just as easily been written by a pragmatist like James: “Divisions of thought are only useful when they are useful. This tautologous statement is not meaningless, but rather it points to the material basis of thinking about thought. If a division of thought is productive of thought, then divide, but if the division blocks thinking, then step back from your fabrication and refabulate from the experience of thinking itself rather than from a hallucination of its image” (163).

It is clear that Smith, by his creative borrowing, is indebted to Laruelle. But this debt is well paid given that Smith’s creative and original theory of nature, or rather the text that presents it, performs its thesis. This is a performance of a new ecosystem of thought. What are we to make of the Narcissus that is philosophy and its comrade Echo, that is, theology? Smith stands in the *metaxu* of these institutionalized disciplines, or perhaps in the liminal space between disciplines, which were never discrete units in the first place. They are not autonomous nor are they self-sufficient. In the extent to which Smith is a theologian, he speaks to theology’s shortcomings. As a philosopher, he calls out philosophy’s arrogance and reminds us that there are no oracular voices. There are only ecosystems of thought which are spread out with unilateral equality. *Tolle lege*.

Mark William Westmoreland
PhD Student, Department of Philosophy
Villanova University

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