

Svetozar Y. Monkov and Bernhardt L. Trout (eds.)  
*Mastery of Nature: Promises and Prospects*  
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Growing out of the ‘Mastery of Nature’ conference held at MIT in 2016, ‘the purpose of the volume ... is to begin to understand the concern characteristic of the modern philosopher-scientists to effect “the mastery and possession of nature” or the “conquest” of nature” in contrast to both earlier philosophers and those who have critiqued this project’ (p. 99). Exploring the origins, development, alternatives and critiques of the ‘project for the conquest of nature’ (p. 137), *Mastery of Nature* provides a wide ranging exploration of the past authors who contributed to this project.

The volume contains sixteen main chapters, the majority of which explore the work of a single author in depth. (The exceptions are chapters six, seven, fifteen and sixteen, which examine Francis Bacon and Benjamin Franklin, Aristotle and Plato, contemporary science, including the work of Einstein and Planck, and quantum mechanics respectively.) These chapters are supported by an opening introduction, which is written by the editors and Daniel A. Doneson. The chapters are divided up into three sections: the first examines ‘the project for mastery’, examining the works of those who ‘were in favour of or laid the ground work for’ the control of nature. This section therefore includes chapters on Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, Montesquieu and Franklin. The second section looks to ‘ancient alternatives and anticipations’ and this is the shortest section, with three chapters exploring Aristotle and Plato, Xenophon and Lucretius. The final part explores those thinkers and disciplines that have offered ‘consequences, critiques and corrections’, and encompasses Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche Heidegger and broader chapters on contemporary science and quantum mechanics. Though the chronological focus is broadly maintained within these sections, dividing the book into these three sections ensures that the text as a whole takes a more analytical focus, highlighting areas of commonality between the different works, as well as the long tradition of critique of the attempt to master nature. This approach represents one of the strengths of the volume, and explaining the choice of such an approach, and of the section themes, further in the introduction would highlight this.

As the above explanation of the book suggests, this text has a broad scope. In examining the work of thinkers from Aristotle to Einstein, via Hobbes and Kant, *Mastery of Nature* has a comprehensive approach, though it should be noted that the focus is exclusively on male authors and those within the Western political canon. Whilst this is dictated by the topic explored, with the introduction suggesting that ‘mastery of nature as such seems to have begun in the West’ (p. 2), the third section focus on critique and correction could have accommodated non-Western, post-colonial or gender-based critiques of the attempt to master nature. The range of works examined expands the appeal of the text, making it relevant to a wide range of scholars and also reflects the topic of the book for, as the introduction notes, the attempt to master nature is an ‘all-encompassing’ and ‘omnipresent’ one that goes beyond concerns for ‘technology and its products’ (p. 2). Despite the required variety of the material covered, there is a sound focus to this volume that helps pull this material together. Within

many of the chapters the impact of the works considered on the development of science is stated more explicitly, as mastery of nature said to be ‘the core aim [of] the modern scientific project’ (p. 210). As a result, though this text contributes to environmental political theory, and to the intersection of history of political thought and environmental political theory in particular, *Mastery of Nature* speaks more clearly to the field of philosophy of science and will be of greater use to students and scholars of that field.

The introduction sets out the aims of the volume and the questions that these authors are exploring, setting up the chapters well, which is crucial given the range of material and the expanse of the topic. However this explanation would need to have been situated in the context of the wider literature in order to highlight what the contribution of this volume is. Locating *Mastery of Nature* within current debates would make clearer to the reader what this text adds to our understanding and how it furthers and informs current debates. The introduction could also explore the methodology of this approach in further depth. The editors note that the works of past thinkers are not ‘historically contingent’ or just ‘tracts for their times’ but instead ‘give us a fundamental insight into the relationship between mastery of nature and the human condition as such’ (p. 7). Yet they also state that ‘we suspect that, were they alive today, most of the philosophers discussed in the chapters below would have written differently from the way they did during their own time’ (p. 7). Developing a thematic approach to the study of political canon has helped expand our understanding of the development of both science and environmental political thought, but bringing such disparate authors and fields of study together, especially in order to reflect and comment on our contemporary knowledge and practice and ‘what can we take away, today, from [these] teachings’ (p. 133) requires further support and defence than is offered here.

There were also several links drawn between the different authors within the separate chapters, as seen for example in Michael A. Gillespie’s discussion of Kant in his chapter on Hegel. This material strengthened the analysis presented, drawing the chapters together into a coherent commentary on the mastery of nature project. Explicitly identifying and highlighting these links in the introduction would have built on this and emphasised the common themes that ran throughout the volume. Alternatively, including a conclusion would have helped to address this omission and round off the text as a whole. With such a wide range of material covered, in terms of both chronology and topic, further explicit signposting is needed to help support the overall argument.

In conclusion, *Mastery of Nature* is a bold text which demonstrates impressive scope and vision, and fulfils its aim to provide ‘a starting point for the elucidation of the problems that [the mastery of nature] entails and its prospects’ (p. 4). However, a greater contextualisation and more explicit links between the chapters and the range of material considered would have carried this project further, and further prepared the ground for this later elucidation.

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