

**Akeel Bilgrami (ed.)**

***Nature and Value***

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I probably share a bias with many readers of *Environmental Values* in thinking that reflection upon nature and value is a worthy activity. We're unusual in this regard: during these times when the miniscule viral taxon SARS-COV-2 buffets the globe, for example, directing everyone's attention to pragmatic issues of human health, we see this outbreak as yet another instantiation of freighted human–nature relations. The edited book *Nature and Value* thus touched a chord for me, and I looked forward to reading it, representing as it does the culmination of a three-year, in-person series of workshops.

To declare another bias, though, I must say that I rarely read – or wish to contribute to – edited books any longer because they rarely function as coherent wholes. They undoubtedly allow publishers to produce books and authors to publish more easily, yet I most often find myself tracking one down for a particular chapter I've seen cited somewhere. Furthermore, modern databases don't handle them very well, so they often languish. I suspect my critical view was influenced by Davis and Blossey (2011), who provide right and wrong reasons for producing them and guidance on 'How to edit a book of value, one that people actually will want to read'. From their analysis, the gold standard I seek is 'a well-integrated collection of chapters around a particular theme that represents a new area of research or inquiry or a novel synthesis' (Davis and Blossey 2011: 247).

This standard aligns well with the present book given that Bilgrami's preface states that 'The depth and originality of these writings would not by itself have warranted the publication of these essays, if there wasn't also an integrity to them ... It is rare to find scholars coming together on a systematic study of a topic, each from their diverse disciplinary location, and converging on a broadly unified standpoint on it' (p. x). Unfortunately, that standpoint was presumed rather than suitably articulated, and the approach in my view was merely multi-disciplinary – that is, 'the members carry out their analyses separately, as seen from the perspective of their individual disciplines, the final result being a series of reports pasted together, without any integrating synthesis' (Max-Neef 2005: 6). There was little attempt to go further in the direction of inter- or trans- disciplinary approaches that are better suited to sustainability challenges (e.g., Hadorn *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, even for a multi-disciplinary approach, some perspectives were over-represented (e.g., humanities) and others were missing (e.g. empirical social science and natural science other than geoscience *sensu lato*).

The book does include some fine contributions, however, so I provide a brief entrée here to guide you as a chapter-gleaner. The book opens with two

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inspired, high-level reflections on the human predicament as a function of human values – punctuated by the remarkable claim that ‘We lack the strength to make ourselves weak’ (p. 5) – by the late Jonathan Schell. Although the editor’s decision to leave these notes unrefined is laudable, the two sets are almost identical.

The book then leaps to the only contributions by a natural scientist, a brief update and a reprint of a previous paper by paleobiologist Jan Zalasiewicz. Zalasiewicz is a major player in the Anthropocene debate, and he provides a critical reminder that to this point temperature and sea level remain ‘normal’ (i.e., relative to recent interglacial periods) even though since the Great Acceleration in the mid-1900s all measures are trending vertically and humans are undoubtedly introducing novel substances. Overall, these chapters provide a clear introduction to how geologists think about strata in relation to the technical problem of the Anthropocene boundary.

The ensuing chapter by Kyle Nichols and Bina Gogineni, although also a reprint, is a highlight of the book, representing as it does the collaboration of a geomorphologist and an English scholar (all other chapters being solo-authored). Unfortunately, it doesn’t engage with the previous chapter by Zalasiewicz (instead referring to a podcast of his on the same topic!), yet it is recommended for its incisive exploration of how traditional geological ‘objectivity’ is being metamorphosed by consideration of human-caused changes, of the challenges this creates for recognising the start date for the Anthropocene, and of the potential political implications of that decision – with its argument for an interdisciplinary approach to these questions beautifully demonstrated by the very collaboration at play.

The book then swerves through a series of substantial, yet disjointed chapters by a philosopher (Akeel Bilgrami), an English scholar (Joanna Picciotto), an economist (Robert Pollin), and a legal scholar (Jedediah Britton-Purdy), which appear to be the multi-disciplinary heart of the book. Bilgrami provides a thought-provoking and rigorous philosophical consideration of how nature has been evacuated of its value properties as well as how political ideals (liberty, equality) might be revived to provide the resources for an unalienated life. Picciotto explores how physico-theology in the eighteenth century encouraged ‘cross-species identification’ as an alternative to the disenchantment of Baconian science. Pollin offers an argument for the potential of green growth (vs. degrowth) for providing climate stabilisation in the United States. Purdy develops a strong case that because we are a ‘world-making’ species, ‘environmental topics are ... [no longer] distinguished by their natural rather than artificial character’ (p. 129), so that extending environmental law beyond its recent focus on toxins and wilderness to ‘infrastructure’ (broadly defined) would be a better way to direct human action.

James Tully’s two chapters provide the best syntheses in the book, not just because he maps out the parallels between some earlier chapters, but because

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he provides an inspired marshalling of the literature that ‘life sustains life’. In short, he argues that we must shift from our current alienated form of life (i.e., the destructive processes of modernisation) to an unalienated one by developing an ‘ecological self’ that is aware of its embeddedness in symbiotic living systems, which can be developed through various practices, most notably gift-based economies.

The next three contributions, by philosophers Anthony Laden, Carol Rovane and Nikolas Kompridis, wade deeply into questions of agency, with the first considering the type of agency involved in our efforts to be sustainable (e.g., what precisely is it that we seek to sustain), the second being noteworthy as the most thorough and critical response within the book, and the third questioning whether Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour’s views of nonhuman agency are appropriate to Anthropocene times. The final chapter, by David Bromwich, draws on Wordsworth’s poetry and the writings of Hans Jonas to show how natural piety – a felt connection with the ‘actual world’ – can be a fount of human responsibility.

To conclude, I am hesitant about this book as a whole because its theme was ill-defined and the chapters were not well-integrated. To paraphrase Raymond Williams, Nature and Value are two of the most complex words in the English language, so it was disappointing that there was no attempt to map out how they were being conceptualised in the book. There were some connections between the chapters, with the interwoven ‘responses’ meant to provide linkages and perhaps interdisciplinary interactions, but they were few and uneven. There was no clear thread throughout and no editorial conclusion to bring the chapters back together, so the promissory note of coherence wasn’t delivered – which again raises the question of why these contributions weren’t configured as journal articles. Finally, I couldn’t help but feel that much of the book wasn’t well grounded in the actual world of birds and trees and sky in a way that would resonate favourably with readers of *Environmental Values*.

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### References

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