



Reinstituting Nature: A Latourian Workshop

Didier Debaise, Pablo Jensen, Pierre Montebello, Nicolas Prignot, Isabelle Stengers, Aline Wiame

► To cite this version:

Didier Debaise, Pablo Jensen, Pierre Montebello, Nicolas Prignot, Isabelle Stengers, et al.. Reinstituting Nature: A Latourian Workshop. *Environmental Humanities*, 2015, 6 (1), pp.167 - 174. <10.1215/22011919-3615943>. <hal-02178038>

HAL Id: hal-02178038

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-02178038v1>

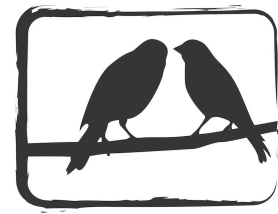
Submitted on 9 Jul 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization



COMMENTARY

Reinstituting Nature: A Latourian Workshop

Didier Debaise, Pablo Jensen, M. Pierre Montebello, Nicolas Prignot, Isabelle Stengers and Aline Wiame

Debaise: Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium; Jensen: Institut des Systèmes Complexes, Université de Lyon, France; Montebello: Département de Philosophie, Université de Toulouse II, France; Prignot, Stengers and Wiame: Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

Translated By :

Stephen Muecke

Environmental Humanities, University of New South Wales, Australia

Translator's introduction

At the end of July 2014 there was a week-long workshop held at the *Ecole des Mines* in Paris, Bruno Latour's former work-place. This was a final workshop, convened by Latour's project, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, which was not only a book, but a website that was an experiment in interactive metaphysics that had been going on for four years.¹ About 30 participants gathered to workshop and rewrite some key contested areas that had been challenged on the site with discussions and counter-examples. One of the round tables working away during the week, occasionally with changes in personnel, was on Nature. Their job (like the other round tables on Politics, Diplomacy, Religion and Economics) was to 'reboot' or reinstitute a concept close to the heart of the Moderns. The assumption was that the traditional concept of nature, as developed through modern European history, would no longer be adequate to a future beset by environmental crises. The main people working on a draft were Didier Debaise, Pablo Jensen, Pierre Montebello, Nicolas Prignot, Isabelle Stengers and Aline Wiame. When they finished the draft, I translated it and it was presented, in French and English, in a final two-day public session at Science Po, to a group of seven international scholars designated as "chargés d'affaires," or "diplomats from the future" whose job was to assess the results of our labours in terms of how they might be met by Gaia, the ur-representative of future planetary crises. The text, originally under the title of *Our "Nature,"* was as follows. ~ Stephen Muecke

¹ Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013); see also the AIME website which fully explains the context for the workshop: <http://www.modesofexistence.org/>. This research has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) / ERC Grant 'IDEAS' 2010 n° 269567.

We Moderns are terribly proud of the fact that we can think of “nature” as it really exists, independently of any kind of culture or belief. The experimental sciences have this kind of pride *when they are successful*, when it becomes possible to say, “Nature has spoken.” But this pride also appears when it is possible for general, one-size-fits-all, judgements to be uttered about the knowledge of other peoples (often without even knowing them) who are supposed to “mix” nature and cultural beliefs.

But how can we define this nature? Now things get complicated. One could talk about it in the way that St Augustine wrote about time: as long as we are not asked, we know what it is, but when we are asked to define it, we Moderns no longer know. Or more exactly, what we know is how to have ferocious disputes about it.

Nature can be secret, hostile, nurturing, mechanical, sublime, infinite, in danger, or even capable of making humans endowed with reason agree with each other...

In these disputes, philosophy has played a rather dubious role. In one way or another, it has pretty much left the idea of a generally knowable nature alone. Sometimes it has added a layer to it that is supposed to escape from science (nature *naturata*/nature *naturans*, for instance), or, on the contrary, has reduced it to what constitutionally allows for scientific knowledge (the Kantian solution). But in so doing philosophy has only dramatised what Whitehead calls the “bifurcation of nature”—on one side an “objective” nature, blind to our values, indifferent to our projects; and on the other a nature which is the very stuff of our dreams, values and projects. Correlatively, it has created the threatening monster of “naturalisation,” which reduces our dreams, values and human projects to blind functions; it has given consistency to a nightmare which feeds the arrogance of some scientists by offering them a carrot, but a poisoned one. And it has constructed, in order to keep this nightmare at a distance, the grand theme of the human exception: go ahead, reduce rabbits to nature, but leave Man alone!

Today, this bifurcated nature partly explains a sort of indifference or scepticism in regard to Gaia. It is as if nature were acting out of character, no longer that which human rationality conquers, but that which plunges us into disarray; it is no longer the backdrop for our human projects, with no project of its own, but is intruding in our dreams, values and projects. How can one not give in to the double temptation of either climatic scepticism, or geoengineering that would put nature back in its place as the thing we should be able to dominate?

Added to the disputes tearing Moderns apart is the fact that, for many other collectives, Nature doesn’t exist. It is neither a representation, nor a concept, nor a problem, nor a place, nor a totality. For these collectives we are neither in Nature, nor face to face with it. So by what right do we make our institution of nature the one capable of fixing the problems facing them? The answers to the changes affecting their ways of life do not necessarily proceed through the institution of a universal Nature allowing the determination of rational solutions. If only it were done in such a way that they could go along with it! If only rationality in this case were not reduced to statistical management models, pure calculations, likely to amplify the problems when not creating new ones.

For instance, during our July 2014 discussions we learned from anthropologist Nastassja Martin² that, in order to protect Alaskan caribou, a management plan was put in place that decided it would be a good idea to cull, even to eradicate, wolves. To fall into line with this pastoral ideal, the caribou just had to transform themselves into sheep, for which we would be the peaceful and reassured shepherds. We wish to protect and conserve the so-called wilderness, but our own idea of wilderness (sublime, innocent, independent of us, and with a hostile and terrifying power) directly clashes with the indifference of our management towards what the territory is asking of us. We are a long way from the pride of the experimenters when they say, “nature has spoken.”

During a preliminary AIME seminar about accounting,³ we also learned from Lesley Green about the case of quotas on Southern African crab fishing in the Cape. How are we supposed to react to the exhaustion of the crab population, which is panicking the western managers, and impoverishing those who live off the harvest? The Modern reaction is to impose quotas via quantitative modelling, which is blind to the difference between industrial and local fishers. But above all, this modelling is exceeded by the crabs themselves. As a result of global warming, far from confining themselves to the role of resource, or biomass, they become agents who betray the modelling attempts through mass migration and/or deaths.

How can Nature be instituted otherwise, in such a way that referring to it we are not tempted to have those multiplicities of territorial relations, that we have not learned to see, dismembered and destroyed by a bifurcation judgement about what “really,” i.e. “objectively,” matters and what is “only subjective”? And besides, in such a way that we avoid insulting scientists by denying the specificity of the practices which allow them to claim access to what they call Nature?

Due Attention

We don't want a hegemonic nature, nor do we want a domesticated one waiting politely to be known. So the first important question here for us is how to “institute” a nature which can respect what scientists care about. This requires us to resist two temptations, one that would make such a nature occupy all available space and the other that would assign it a determined place, neutralising it and making it incapable of interfering with other values and other institutions.

We would like to carry forward a proposition of Alfred North Whitehead, a seemingly insignificant one, but one that, if unfolded, will allow us to situate nature without assigning it a place. It will also allow us to diagnose the by-products of the former institution, especially what it failed to protect.

We are instinctively willing to believe that by due attention, more can be found in nature than that which is observed at first sight. But we will not be content with less.⁴

² Doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Philippe Descola, *Métamorphoses des relations entre l'homme et son environnement en pays Gwich'in – Etats-Unis, Alaska*.

³ Let's Calculate: Reinventing Accounting with Bruno Latour?, AIME Workshop Paris, 5 May 2014 organized by: Martin Giraudeau & Vincent Lépinay

⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 29.

Here the “we” is indeterminate: it concerns non-humans as much as humans, and cannot be reduced to an observing subject. The attention of an animal on the alert, facing possible danger, is testimony to the fact that there are ways of learning “more” about the source of a noise (is it a predator?).

As for “Nature,” its articulation with the “more to be found” can satisfy the requirements of experimental scientists—their form of realism. It can happen that if one lends due attention to whatever one is dealing with, more can be learned about it. What these scientists will not accept, what the alert rabbit’s ears are witness against, is an erratic nature, the stuff of a kaleidoscopic dream, which takes form or unravels, or metamorphoses itself each time the manner of paying attention to it changes, as if attention was dissolving (or deconstructing) that to which we were willing to pay attention.

Another indeterminate expression is “due attention.” We know that this attention is not general, but is, when “nature” is involved, articulated to the possibility of “finding more.” But the question as to what attention is appropriate, in one case or another, for learning more, is open, and it is here that we can raise the specific question of the so-called modern sciences.

Bruno Latour has associated experimental sciences with the possibility of accessing “remote” or “distant” things. But this possibility, indeed associated with the experimental origins (Galileo) of modern sciences, does not have to mean that it is the exclusive synonym for the possibility of “learning more.” Nor is the question of “due attention” bound to reducing itself to attending to the quality of the chains of reference. Creating stable chains of reference that allow a transfer of “immutable mobiles”⁵ is, however, an achievement we want to retain. We don’t want to weaken in any way the genuine trust presupposed by the question of this specific kind of due attention, which is especially vital in case of scientific controversy: there would be no controversy if the protagonists did not trust that the remote being which we are paying attention to *may* sometimes be rendered capable of confirming that “more” has well and truly been found.

Experimental sciences, when they succeed, allow us to access “remote” or “distant” things, but it is crucial to emphasise that both remoteness and distance also mean indifference. Indifference is a prerequisite for reference, and, more broadly, for the experimental sciences. It can’t be said often enough: the work that produces accessibility assumes the indifference of whatever we are trying to access. Imagine a Mt Aiguille⁶ that is sensitive, ticklish, changing its shape every night because it doesn’t like the way the trail markers are sticking into it. Or even cooperative, producing by itself a whole lot of markers because that seems to be what is interesting. What we are studying has to be indifferent to our questions in order for us to keep coming back, adjusting, asking “but then?” or “and so?” to whatever we have found.

In contrast, facts in social psychology, for example, have a short life-span—the time needed for the guinea-pigs to understand what is going on in the situation they have been put into and what is expected of them. This is not a matter of a general “limit,” but of a signal: we deal with beings for whom the situation they are confronted with matters.⁷ In this case, if the

⁵ Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 74-88.

⁷ Isabelle Stengers, “The Curse of Tolerance” in *Cosmopolitics II*, trans. R. Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

point is to “learn more”—and not to obtain extorted obedience for instance the whole question of the kind of “due attention” which is demanded has to be reworked. Any blind extension of experimental freedom, imposing upon what is addressed the situation corresponding to the experimenter’s own question, regardless of the meaning of this situation for the addressee, may be characterised as counterfeiting the experimental achievement, obtaining an answer in a way which prohibits “finding more.” Such a blind extension is to be resisted in particular when the addressee may be unilaterally submitted to conditions that, postulating its indifference, confront it with a meaningless environment. Ethology is just beginning to accept the hard lesson that one does not learn from beings turned into zombies. The due attention demanded from ethologists thus requires addressing an animal defined as “non-indifferent,” an animal for which the way it is addressed matters. “Finding more” means, first of all, finding the questions that are relevant for the animal, the questions which correspond to situations which make sense for it.⁸

In the social sciences, in anthropology, the question of what it means “to learn more” is a matter of relentless debate, and it is especially likely to enter into composition with other preoccupations. Because of its non-innocence, it is all the more important to resist here any hegemony of the articulation proposed by Whitehead between “nature,” “due attention” and “find more.” We certainly do not want to denounce the crafting of the particular kind of relation, the value of which would be to make it possible to “find more” *about* others. But this crafting cannot claim any privilege compared to the crafting of relations creating reciprocity or the possibility of learning together with.

Retroactively, what we used to call “nature” implied the association of the modern sciences with a general kind of method. Thus, the local and situated success of experimentation, ever since Galileo, has been used as a model for a method that can access any terrain, objectively answer any question, instead of being added to other modes of attention. Galileo himself began the betrayal of what he instaurated—experimental achievement. His method was claimed to be the only way to access “nature”, everything else was reduced to a category that foreshadows “relativism”: arbitrary fiction or idle chatter.

“Eppur si muove”—this cry should be heard as situated by the problem, that is, as addressed to the long line of astronomers and theologians who came before Galileo and to those for whom the difference between a moving Earth and an immobile Earth at the centre of the world did matter. But it can also be heard as “the Earth is ‘really’ moving, despite human beliefs.” Replacing scholarly geocentric positions with “human beliefs” means that the moving Earth should matter for all humans, whatever the relation they entertain with the Earth. It heralds the figure of Science as opposed to belief. “Really” is then defined “against belief” and should intervene wherever Science claims authority. And since this “really” requires what we may indeed grant to the astronomers’ Earth, that its behaviour is indifferent to the way it is addressed, this same indifference must be extended wherever Science has to prevail against belief. Nature must be emptied of everything that does not satisfy the requirement of indifference.

Sciences, in the plural, exemplify the possibility of finding more, and Galileo’s moving Earth exemplifies this, as it was the starting point for new questions, new chains of reference,

⁸ Vinciane Despret, *Que diraient les animaux si ... on leur posait les bonnes questions ?*, Paris, La découverte/ Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2012.

new fruitful ways to pay attention for all those whose practices came to be concerned by what had been an astronomers' quarrel. But the paradox is that Science wants us to accept that there is less, always less to find, to accept that any scientific addition has for its result a sweeping subtraction. For example, finding the molecules correlated with the odour of a particular wine (stabilising an objective and independent mode of access), means adding something new to the world, that allows the reconfiguration of production practices, the training of the palate, etc. The paradox shows up once someone claims that the odour of the wine "is only" the effect of this molecule together with the appalling refrains "you believe, we know" and "that's all it is," destroying all the complexity of the practices associated with wine. The same happens when, from the discovery of incredible neuronal entanglements, a war machine is produced aiming to reduce all experience and all thought to a nasty little naturalism concerning neuronal interaction. The main question for the moderns then becomes synonymous with "naturalisation": either submitting oneself to the narcissistic wounds inflicted by Reason ("Man is only ...") or resisting the assaults of "objectivism" devoted to destroying the treasures of a human subjectivity.

If only this were a just a mistake ... The consequences have been catastrophic, a machine has been unleashed producing arrogant and vacuous scientists, but also an eradicating war machine, directly connected to other machines of appropriation and expropriation. The simple fact of speaking of "nature," including cases of protecting it, keeping it the way it is, "against" humans—a vacuousness peculiar to ecologists full of good faith and good will—can be part of the eradication machine. We are certainly not paying due attention to the hunt for caribou, crucial for the peoples of the American far north. We define this hunt as something that must be eradicated, that threatens declining caribou numbers. Learning more about it would not necessarily have solved the problem, but it would at least have avoided the indignity of suggesting to these people that they become farmers planting winter-resistant GM potatoes. This vacuousness of so-called rational solutions is coupled with a vision of nature as wilderness (mirror, some say, to our own savagery), always independent of humans, which should be protected from them, that is, needing to be redefined for the caribou to survive protected, scrutinised, their predators removed, in short, "humanised."

It is not only in the encounter with other peoples, for whom what we understand by this word, "nature," is (unsurprisingly) hard to understand, that this problem arises. At the heart of modernity, we live in the midst of a cemetery of practices sacrificed on the altar of hegemonic method. Today, any practice is just a surviving one, threatened by eradication. Even the "due attention" cared for and nurtured by experimental scientists is threatened by the objectively evaluated imperative for finding something publishable or patentable.

In reinstituting nature we are obliged to make the question of due attention a crucial one. We have to resist the temptation of making nature something that can be defined once and for all. We don't want to give up the possibility of learning more about it, but this is no authorisation for judging that learning something new is the destiny and duty of humanity ...

Civilising Nature: We Belong to the Earth

Rethinking the institution of nature is all the more urgent as we must address the consequences of the intrusion of Gaia in our all too human scenography. We have to resist not only the bad

faith of climate deniers but also the well-meaning search for direct answers, that is global ones, mobilising Mankind, demanding that peoples “under attack” forget spurious bickering.

If Gaia translates our knowledge that the climatic disorders that we are experiencing are part of a process that will get increasingly worse, then this knowledge relates to the work of the specialists in the Working Group 1 of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). As such, we can say that Gaia is an example of “finding more,” in relation to the earth’s climate, and thus is part of nature. But the relation between science and nature takes on a particularly singular appearance here, in the sense that the fact of finding more, which is generally communicating with the fact of being able to do more, is in this case likely to frighten “the finders,” forcing a whistle-blowing role on them. The models are “neutral” in the sense that what they are talking about is well and truly indifferent to them, but they speak of a direct relation between the disorder that is threatening and human activity (characterised in a neutral language in terms of greenhouse gases emissions).

The temptation to be resisted here is that the alarm be transformed via other institutions into a new type of power, or of duty, that of imposing the reference to Gaia on other peoples of the Earth. Then the disarray of the moderns would turn into a new legitimate demand that all bow to the consequences of our new knowledge—“Nature has spoken.” This is not, of course, a matter of the other peoples being ignorant. Everywhere on the earth, from Amazonia to the far north, from the vineyards of Burgundy to the Cape Town crabs, an increasing number of situations are witness to an undeniable disorder. It is a matter of refusing to affirm that these disorders that affect humans and non-humans would have for their only truth the same universal natural cause, demanding from everybody anywhere on the earth recognition and compliance with one “rational” course of action.

The knowledge regarding the intrusion of Gaia comes from global models, models that can only be global. It is thus a knowledge that as such is doubly silent. First, it is silent on the disorders that affect and will affect different earthly localities, precisely because the global variables do not authorise local derivations (example: neither the local distribution of the temperature rise nor its ecological, human and economic consequences in a given place can be derived from the global model). But also and above all, these variables have nothing to do with the way in which humans and non-humans can respond to these disorders. The only response that this type of global knowledge can provide would be in the order of a “simple” reduction in greenhouse gases. Such a response implies such an abstract universality that it can only correspond either to a statistical bureaucracy which would thus make nature into a universal institution, or into the sorcerer’s apprentice’s geo-engineering dream.

Civilising the institution of nature implies a strong distinction between nature and earth. On nature, we will say that it is related to the possibility of “finding more,” and that it is what we are dealing with in this modality. On the Earth, we will say we belong to it, just like all other collectives. Thus Gaia is not another name for the Earth. Gaia is what the IPCC models and numbers teach us about (reinstated) nature.⁹ In other terms, we must resist putting the Earth under the sign of a globality that belongs to the scientific modelling which allowed us to

⁹ On Gaia, see Bruno Latour’s Gifford lectures, available online; or Bruno Latour “Waiting for Gaia: Composing the common world through arts and politics.” Lecture at the French Institute, London, November 2011. Available online: http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/124-GAIA-LONDON-SPEAP_0.pdf

find more. The signification of Gaia is that of a question that intensifies relations in all earthly localities, but in no case is confused with the common truth of the problems put to human and non-human terrestrial collectives. Gaia does not have the power of unifying these localities, nor of unifying the manner in which the response will be given to these local disorders. That could be our chance: Gaia's demands constrain us to go back to earthly practices, these alone being able to deal with local, situated and complex configurations. Earthly practices mean due attention to territories, to the various ways all beings, human and non-human, populate and indeed co-produce the Earth through bodily, intra- and interspecific, historical, political, ritual, technical, economical and even mineral practices. Our belonging to the Earth can be more than a fate if we take the risk of associating the needed task of composition with the challenge of learning the demands of radical pluralism regarding each territory, each practice, each being, each collective.

Among these collectives, there are those that belong to the scientific institution. The problem for these collectives is to "find more," certainly, but in such a way that the significance of what they find may indeed contribute to earthly situations, but without ever claiming to provide their rational, or scientific definition. This implies a double constraint. First, the mode of "due attention" to learn more should assert its situated character. Then, this mode should be articulated with other modes of attention, relating especially to other institutions. A current example is that of agroecology, a scientific field whose specialists insist that what they find only has value and significance to the extent that it responds to the knowledges and requirements of farmers, of concrete milieus, of constraints to do with distribution and marketing. It is a case of "slow" science, which the institution, the way it is working at the moment, would readily eliminate, if the concerns of other collectives did not insist on its importance. Among these collectives, particularly crucial are those who pay due attention, not to find more, but to politically address the unsustainable, Gaia-provoking, character of what has been called "development."

Bibliography

- Despret, Vinciane. *Que diraient les animaux si ... on leur posait les bonnes questions?* Paris, La découverte/Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2012.
- Stengers, Isabelle. "The Curse of Tolerance" in *Cosmopolitics II*. Translated by R. Bononno. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- Latour, Bruno. "Waiting for Gaia: Composing the Common World Through Arts and Politics." Lecture at the French Institute, London, November 2011. Accessed 14 April 2015. http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/124-GAIA-LONDON-SPEAP_0.pdf
- _____. Gifford Lectures, University of Edinburgh, 2013. Accessed 14 April 2015. <http://www.ed.ac.uk/about/video/lecture-series/gifford-lectures>
- _____. *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*. Translated by C. Porter. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. *The Concept of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920.