



Research Institute for
Humanity and Nature
大学共同利用機関法人 総合地球環境学研究所
人間文化研究機構

〒603-8047 京都府京都市北区上賀茂本山457番地4
457-4 Motoyama, Kamigamo, Kita-ku, Kyoto, 603-8047 JAPAN
TEL: 075-707-2448 / +81-75-707-2448
FAX: 075-707-2106 / +81-75-707-2106
MAIL: UJES@chikyu.ac.jp

Uehiro Research Center for Japan Environmental Studies cordially invites you to the lecture titled:

Agential Nature

given by

Professor Luca Illetterati (University of Padova)

held at

Seminar Room 3, Research Institute and Humanity and Nature, Kyoto, Japan, and

Online

on

Tuesday, 22 April 2025, 15:00 to 17:00 JST

Biography: Luca Illetterati is a Full Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at the University of Padova, Italy. He is the Principal Investigator of the research project “Agential Nature. Rethinking Nature after the End of Nature” (funded by the Cariparo Foundation) and of the Research Center for the Philosophy of Translation based at the University of Padova. Professor Illetterati is the Scientific Director of the journal “Verifiche – Rivista di Filosofia”, editor-in-chief of the philosophical blog “HegelPd”, and a member of the Board of the “Internationale Hegel Vereinigung”. He was awarded the Leibniz Professorship at the University of Leipzig in 2023. His main academic interests are Classical German philosophy, especially Hegel, the problem of philosophical understanding of nature between modern and contemporary philosophy, and philosophical problems of translation. Among his publications: “Purposiveness. Teleology between Nature and Mind”, 2008 (with F. Micheli); “Das Endliche und das Unendliche in Hegels Denken”, 2004 (with F. Menegoni); “Fra tecnica e natura. Problemi di ontologia del vivente in Heidegger”, 2002; “Figure del limite. Forme ed esperienze della finitezza”, 1996; “Natura e Ragione. Sullo sviluppo dell’idea di natura in Hegel”, 1995.

Pre-Registration Requested: <https://bit.ly/AgentNat2504>

Agential Nature
Luca Illetterati
University of Padova

Abstract: Nature is an enigmatic object, says Merleau-Ponty in the introduction to his famous 1956-57 lectures at the Collège de France. And it is because it is “an object that is not quite an object”. Indeed, nature is never before or against us, as befits an object. Merleau-Ponty writes that nature is not “what is in front of us” but what carries us: “it is our soil”. By speaking of nature as soil and not as an object, Merleau-Ponty means that nature is characterized by a specific difference from the human being, but also that this difference is not foreignness: Nature is not instituted by humans, says Merleau-Ponty, it is not a construct of theirs, and yet it is not opposed to them, it is not the other of subjectivity. Nature as *a completely external being* and thus as *a pure object*, defined by its opposition to the human subject, is the nature that, according to Merleau-Ponty, asserts itself against the background of the Judeo-Christian idea of infinity, especially in Descartes, when he splits into a *natura naturans*, which constitutes the dimension of meaning, and a *natura naturata*, which is instead a mere *product* and thus *pure externality*. As a product, as *naturata*, nature is a mode of being that is *dependent on* something other than itself. According to Merleau-Ponty, in Descartes nature becomes a synonym for *mere existence*, an externality “without orientation, without inwardness”. From this perspective, this external product that is nature is the realization of a rationality that conceives of it “as a system of laws” - to use McDowell’s terminology -; the Cartesian worldview seems to refer to a structure that encompasses three dimensions: on the one hand, God, who is the master architect; on the other, nature; and in the third place, humans, who are neither God nor nature, but who participates in both.

This concept of nature, that is, the idea of nature as an entirely external being, a pure object that receives its meaning from outside, must be overcome, according to a substantial part of contemporary humanities, also to find an answer to the questions arising from the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene. More radically, it is the very notion of nature that must be overcome. This notion not only implies a peculiar attitude of humans towards the world that relies on the modern apparatus that makes the subject the world’s all-encompassing horizon of meaning, but also a metaphysics in the broadest sense of the word that would have exposed the Anthropocene as untenable.

The perspective that I would like to propose here in response to these discussions is what I call a *non-naturalistic naturalism*: an obvious oxymoron with which I would like to emphasize both the necessity of continuing to refer to a concept such as nature and the necessity of redefining it conceptually in relation to a traditionally naturalistic view in which nature is defined as a sphere separate from the human dimension, regulated by a different rationality from the one that characterizes the world of culture. The fact that many contemporary lines of thought seek to get rid of the concept of nature to replace it with other concepts is, in my opinion, one of the signs of the non-acceptance of the non-instituted and non-constructed character of nature mentioned by Merleau-Ponty. For this reason, many of these paths run the risk of dissolving their critique of the modern apparatus into a radicalization of it. It is not a matter of freeing oneself from the concept of nature, but rather of working on and in it in the sense of a re-semanticization and *decolonizing* it, if I may use the term, from its naturalistic version. To decolonize nature from its naturalist version means to free nature from a metaphysical scaffolding that defines it in opposition to subjectivity and over which subjectivity can thus dispose by taking nature as a mere object. Or again, it means to free it from a perspective according to which this notion acquires its status only as something other than and opposed to culture, politics and freedom, as if it simply denotes the neutral and inert background of the subject’s activity, cultural and social practices and political action. To speak, as I suggest, of not naturalistic naturalism does not mean, in a banal way, reducing subjectivity to nature or nature to subjectivity, but rather to move in the direction of a redefinition of such concepts – that of subjectivity

and that of nature – taking as our starting point the necessity of thinking subjectivity in and of nature, that is, of thinking what is called agency, as something constitutive of nature itself, that characterizes the same mode of being of nature and that allows us to think its intrinsic subjectivity.

To go in this direction, after a brief critical consideration of current attempts to dissolve the concept of nature, I will refer to some theoretical examples from classical German philosophy and concentrate on the concept of *agency*, interpreting it as a concept that, instead of being read in opposition to the way nature is, should be thought of as an element that constituting it and from which the possibility of a plural articulation of the forms of subjectivity that inhabit the world acquires meaning. The concept of *natural agency* appears as a contradiction to a dominant naturalistic narrative, which simplistically assumes that where there is *agency*, there is no nature, and where there is nature, there is no *agency*. According to this view, on the one hand, considering something as nature means depriving it of any form of recognition of agency; recognizing agency implies a form of exclusion from the natural as such. To think of *natural agency* – to productively accept the oxymoronic character that this concept once again exhibits – means instead moving toward a fluidification of the relationship between nature and culture. A fluidification that by no means implies the suspension of difference and thus the dissolution of nature and culture into an indeterminate whole or the reduction of one of the two terms to the other, but rather a redefinition of this relationship, which is articulated in the mutual determination of *relata*. Only in this way, that is, only if we think of subjectivity as something rooted in nature itself, and only if we think of nature outside of a naturalistic horizon and instead as a mode of being characterized by its own specific subjectivity, can we get out of considering nature as a neutral and defenceless background on which human subjectivity acts and over which human subjectivity can dispose.

References on the concept of ‘Agential Nature’: To speak of *natural agency* means to think of the notion of *agency* outside the human realm or, in any case, outside a context of intentionality. On this point, see B. Latour, *Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene*, “New Literary History”, 45/1, 2014, pp. 1–18. An interesting articulation of the concept of *agency* in a sense particularly incident to the perspective I am developing is the one proposed within the so-called *New Materialism*, and more specifically, in what is called *Agential Realism*, the main representative of which is Karen Barad: see K. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007. For Barad, phenomena are, therefore, ontologically primitive relationships in which the referents do not exist before the relationship and emerge through specific *intra-actions*. For further perspectives on the question of *natural agency*, see V. Plumwood, *Nature as Agency and the Prospects for a Progressive Naturalism*, in “Capitalism Nature Socialism”, 2001, 12/4, pp. 3-32; L. Nash, *The Agency of Nature or the Nature of Agency?*, in “Environmental History”, 2005, 10(1), pp. 67-69; S. Gallagher, *The Natural Philosophy of Agency*, in “Philosophy Compass”, 2007, 2, pp. 347-357.