

Susanne Claxton

Heidegger's Gods: An Ecofeminist Perspective

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Reviewed by Trish Glazebrook, 2018

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Claxton's book is a Heideggerian and ecofeminist assessment of the conceptual roots of planetary crisis and an argument for a different way of thinking. It is shocking in its honesty, disturbing in its rawness, and outrageous in its audacity. I couldn't stop reading. I paused once to sleep. This is not the tedious detailing of citation after citation crawling toward a safe, well-protected conclusion. It's an active vision, a living panorama leaping across mountaintops. Nonetheless, its chapters tether the account tightly to ideas of particular thinkers and so ground the vision in precise, careful, and well-founded argument. The book's honesty appears, for example, in accounts of the outcomes of practicing phenomenological methods with students, but also in its intellectual commitment to tenderness throughout.

Its rawness is an approach to scholarship that takes what it needs from existing debates without explicative overkill. I have tried to overcome in this review an academic desire to name texts that should also have been consulted--an engagement, for example, with Heidegger on Plato would really fill out the assessment of the Greeks--because such supplementing would not add anything new or better but simply make for a longer book. A confounding of "transcendental" and "transcendent" in early parts is worth just letting go for what comes later. An apparent tendency to fall into a metaphysics of presence is just that--apparent--the withdrawal of being cannot be experienced without the presencing of beings, and Claxton's culminating point is exactly Dasein's capacity (whether realized or not) *not* simply to get lost among beings but to see a bigger picture. The book's academic readers should also not give up the forest to quibble over the trees.

The book's audacity is its unabashed claim to prescribe a solution for global crises. The thing is, this book brings together the Heideggerian and ecofeminist critiques of modernity in a clear, convincing, straightforward way that grounds and provides much-needed conceptual support for what I am regularly and consistently hearing from policy-makers, environmental economists, non-governmental and civil society organizations, indigenous groups, women of the global South, trade unions, even scientists, at the annual Conference of Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. This book should certainly be read by ecofeminists, Heidegger scholars, and other intellectuals, but it is not a book just for academics. It's far too

true, blunt, and courageous. This book should be read by anyone concerned about the planet, exploitation of any kind, and the future of human experience.

The first chapter is an introduction that describes the book as "an ecofeminist Heideggerian phenomenology or perhaps an eco-phenomenological Heideggerian feminism" (1). The book is indeed very much Heideggerian in its conceptual framework, with particular focus on his writings on dwelling; but it is much more than an explication of Heidegger insofar as Claxton draws on readers of Heidegger--Giorgio Agamben, Iain Thomson, and myself--to go beyond Heidegger by "describing . . . symptoms, making a diagnosis, and . . . describing a cure" (5) for the crises of modernity. Her book is also very much ecofeminist as the particular crisis at issue is an environmental crisis that Claxton uses an ecofeminist framework to argue is rooted in a phallic logic of domination. In short, the book fleshes out what Heidegger might have meant by "dwelling" as an alternative to the homelessness of contemporary experience in the global North. I say "global North" to avoid the totalizing "we" that homogenizes human experience, and to displace the term "modernity" that indicates a time in history but is also a particular global geography, that is, the hegemony of Eurocentric technoscience driving capital. Not all knowledge-systems are Heidegger's *Gestell*; not everyone is homeless in nature. This book is, however, a panacea for homelessness in which being "at home" is a cure for the global destruction enacted by technoscience-enabled capital. Being "at home" in Claxton's account appropriates Heidegger's poetic dwelling--a "flourishing of beings" (142) through "knowledge and tenderness" (26 and elsewhere) that is grounded in "openness and an abiding care" (140), and a "receptivity" that is "gratitude-laden and appreciative" (129). This is the vision of this book.

The second and third chapters read Heidegger, first on the Greeks, then on poetry. Concerning the Greeks, the chapter starts with the claim that the Greeks "lived with and within something that was exceedingly vital . . . yet . . . did not analyze it" (7), but that is simply not the case--certainly Heraclitus and Parmenides did, and Heidegger spent much ink on what texts remain of their analyses. The larger point holds strongly, however: the Greek word for truth, *alêtheia*, contains *lethe*--the name of a river in Hades that covers over memory--at its core. Truth as Heidegger appropriates it from the Greeks is unconcealment that has concealment at its core. That is, "human dwelling is grounded in hiddenness" (19); human understanding thus can never be exhaustive. Accordingly, a "proper orientation . . . entails an attitude of respect and reverence toward nature" (23), in acknowledgment of the finitude of human knowing.

This is where Claxton first introduces Heidegger's gods as an element of "the Fourfold" of earth and sky, mortals and immortals (20-31). Her account is more spiritual than religious and interprets Heidegger's gods through expression of humility, of the experience of wonder that there are things at all rather than nothing, of understanding that knowing is finite and nature exceeds human intent. *Physis*, reductively translated as "nature," is emergence (as Aristotle defined it, what comes into being of its own accord). Claxton explains this using Hesiod's account of the origin of the universe in Chaos that is not disorder (as chaos is now understood), but "the gap or yawn which . . . allows things to begin their essential unfolding" (37). Respect for life (and therefore death) is missing in the materialist homelessness Claxton seeks to remedy insofar as technoscientific epistemology does not dwell in this gap: rather than understanding

truth as an opening of being that makes beings possible, objectivity sees only the presence of beings as objects that can be mastered.

Claxton finds a guide to dwelling, as the experience of being rather than just of beings, in the poet. The poet stands in the ontological difference between being and beings. Claxton capitalizes "Being" throughout, as do many Heidegger scholars writing in English; the ensuing risk of hypostatization leads me not to, and I think not capitalizing "being" is actually more consistent with her analysis of the poet's capacity not to succumb to totalizing thinking. Claxton explicates the poet using four questions Heidegger posed. What is the poet's own? Thoughtful confrontation with being. From where does it come? Destiny, that is, the gods--the poet does not--cannot--choose to be a poet. To where is the poet compelled? To knowledge (*Wissenschaft*)--that Claxton explains as reflective thinking and tenderness (*Zärtlichkeit*)--that she explains as an "open, receptive and appreciative" orientation (52). How is the poet compelled? Through a "capacity to be claimed by Being" (53), that is, an ability to "overcome the tendency to totalization . . . that disposes each understanding of being to take itself to be the whole story" (54). Whereas scientific knowledge consists in a subject understanding an object, poetic insight sees beyond this relation with beings to being (from chapter 2, the gap that affords the emergence of beings) that withdraws in the face of beings, and the poet accordingly understands that there are other possibilities of being that can reveal beings differently. That is, nature is not just what is reducible to technoscientific exploitation, but the unfolding of life in a play of revelation and concealment.

The fourth chapter genders homelessness. Claxton explains ecofeminism as essentially supposition that oppression of women and exploitation of nature are inherently linked. She identifies four explanatory factors to which ecofeminists attribute "a general loss of dwelling" (83). First, the *mechanistic, materialist model* of seventeenth-century science reduces nature to "simple, dead, and inert matter . . . to be conquered, manipulated, and controlled" (85). Second, *capitalism* exploits women as "mediator of nature" (87) because of a psychic structure caused by social roles imposed on women in consequence of the female reproductive capacity. Women's work, often unpaid, and nature's productivity before appropriation, are both invisible in capitalism (91). Third, ancient transition from immanent, earth-based divinities to transcendent, nonvisible "sky-gods" established a distant, masculine, *patriarchal authority*. The patriarchal concept of culture moreover arose when male hunters interacted with men from outside their group; this concept is accordingly man's, whereas women exist somewhere between nature and culture (93). Fourth, *dualisms* (inherently value dualisms) put two terms into a hierarchy that determines what is superior (and often definitive of a norm, or taken to be neutral) while the second term is made inferior. These four factors generate the phallic order as an inauthentic homelessness, "a fundamental loss of reverence for life itself and the life-giving power of the earth, nature, and women" (99). Moreover, in defining woman and nature as what is to be dominated and controlled, man defines himself as "the rightful ruler" (101).

The fifth chapter assesses the ecofeminist account of the phallic order in terms of Agamben's account of sovereign power that Claxton appropriates as the *sovereign masculine*, out of which emerges a fascinating and original reading of the mythical figure Lilith. Agamben argues for the political necessity of *homo sacer* who is "abandoned, exiled and cast out" (109). Such out-casting suspends and withdraws both juridical and divine law, so *Homo sacer* cannot be

murdered (juridical law) or sacrificed (divine law), but thus can be freely killed by anyone. *Homo sacer* is, in Agamben's analysis, in a *state of exception* in which "sovereign power is manifest in its own absence" (110); that is, sovereign power asserts itself through withdrawal. Human law and divine law are bound together in human accountability to both. Agamben argues that sovereign power, by casting *homo sacer* out, reveals the outcast as a *hinge* between the two kinds of law, and thus sets up its dominion in both realms. Lilith is just such an outcast, a hinge of human sexuality that establishes the order of Adam and Eve. That is, patriarchy depends on casting out Lilith so order--the phallic order--is brought to the relation between man and woman in sovereign masculine power.

These five chapters complete Claxton's diagnosis; the sixth details her cure. Here, Claxton argues that what she calls "Daseincentrism" overcomes the binary of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. This may sound trivial--a dull argument between environmental philosophers--given that what is at stake is global crisis. Yet this is not just any binary. It is the human/nature binary that is decisive for human experience and global ecosystems at a time when an ideology of human superiority over nature (and human "others") and supposed right to unchecked technoscientific-enabled exploitation of natural systems (and human labor) for profit is well into engineering the next great extinction by changing the planet's atmosphere. This ideology is anthropocentric instrumentalism. Yet humans are not "merely part of nature" (125), as ecocentrism contends, argues Claxton. Dasein, as the being "for whom being itself is an issue" (144), warrants "special recognition" (146) because of its capacity to understand being "as the source of all beings while necessarily exceeding them" (147). The final short chapter displaces sovereign masculinity and its assumptions of man as conqueror and all else as consumable instrument. It identifies what Heidegger called "meditative thinking" as "fundamentally required for the attainment of full *dwelling*" (150), that is, poetic dwelling that encounters beings in "receptivity, wonder, and gratitude" and brings a "return to the hearth" (156). Counter to the logic of domination Heidegger called "*Gestell*" that seeks to master and control all it encounters, meditative thinking tempers knowledge with tenderness and feels for what it encounters. Meditative thinkers are at home with beings because they live *with* beings in understanding that beings support human life without a reduction to human knowledge or desire.

The book is not a final statement but insists instead that knowledge is never complete and invites discussion and carrying forward of its aims and ideas. In this spirit, I ask, if sovereign power is enacted by withdrawal, and being is, as Heidegger often said, a withdrawal (insofar as the concealment at the heart of the unconcealment--the making visible--of any being is the withdrawal of being), then might it be the case that Heidegger's account of being is another inscription of the sovereign masculine? Indeed, given Claxton's ecofeminist analysis, "anthropocentric" is not really an accurate descriptor of the instrumental, calculative thinking ecocentrics and Heideggerians like me see as setting up global conquest of the planet. Rather, the epoch of "the sovereign masculine" is androcentric. The dualism at issue is accordingly not so much anthropocentric/biocentric as androcentric/biocentric. In Claxton's account, identification of the hinge is Agamben's method for revealing sovereign power in order, I assume, to disrupt blind belief that entrenched prejudices (what ecofeminists call the -isms of domination, such as racism and sexism) are some kind of unchangeable natural order. Androcentrism/biocentrism, given women's "mediator" status between man and nature discussed in chapter 4, is a reinscription of the sovereign masculine that sets up the binary of man/woman. Lilith is argued to

be the hinge of that sovereign masculine in chapter 5. Dasein is the outcast hinge of androcentrism/ biocentrism in chapter 6. If I am reading Claxton correctly here, two things follow. First, as the outcast who can be killed by anyone but neither murdered nor sacrificed, Dasein is powerless in the face of the sovereign masculine; can Dasein enact the cure Claxton envisions? Second, since the binaries at issue here are different expressions of sovereign masculinity, is not Dasein in some fundamental way a different expression of, and always already, Lilith? If so, it's time Dasein came home. She is very much needed. This book too is needed as the first full-length monograph bringing Heidegger together with ecofeminism in an inspired, original articulation of his gods to remind its readers that current practices of ecodestruction and exploitation can be otherwise.