

PLATO'S PIGS AND OTHER RUMINATIONS

The ancient Greeks and Romans have been charged with destroying the ecosystems within which they lived. In this book, however, M. D. Usher argues rather that we can find in their lives and thought the origin of modern ideas about systems and sustainability, important topics for humanity today and in the future. With chapters running the gamut of Greek and Roman experience – from the Presocratics and Plato to Roman agronomy and the Benedictine Rule – *Plato's Pigs* brings together unlikely bedfellows, both ancient and modern, to reveal surprising connections. Lively prose and liberal use of anecdotal detail, including an Afterword about the author's own experiments with sustainable living on his sheep farm in Vermont, add a strong authorial voice. This is a unique, first-of-its-kind book that is sure to be of interest to anyone working in Classics, environmental studies, philosophy, ecology, or the history of ideas.

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M. D. Usher
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PLATO'S PIGS AND OTHER
RUMINATIONS

Ancient Guides to Living with Nature

M. D. USHER

University of Vermont



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*To a Mouse,
On Turning Her up in Her Nest with the Plough,
November, 1785*
I'm truly sorry Man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle,
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
An' fellow-mortal!

—Robert Burns

*

Rerum natura, hoc est vita, narratur.
My subject is the world of Nature, or, in other words, Life.
—Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Preface §13

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Preface

The ideas expressed in this book are drawn from my experiences and aptitudes as a professional classicist and self-taught agriculturalist. They are “essays” in the original sense of the word – “forays,” “ventures,” “attempts,” as Montaigne used the term, and as French academics still like to describe their works today. To say that is not to claim a pedigree, to be sure, or to excuse any sloppy thinking, inadequate research, or overstatement of points, though I hope to have kept those kinds of things to a minimum. (I know they have not been excluded entirely.) In the course of writing I quickly realized that each chapter could easily have been or become a book in itself. I hope others will write those books, whether they be inspired or incensed by the approach I have taken in any given instance here. If nothing else, I will be pleased if this foray into the genealogy of ideas – or rather, two specific, related ideas – starts a conversation. Those ideas are, in a nutshell: (1) an engagement with Nature and an understanding of human knowledge and experience that is based on a consideration of whole systems, and, relatedly, (2) values and practices that are conducive to sustainable living.

As I try to tease out in the Introduction, I characterize the subject matter and approach of this book as “environmental philology.” I think I may have coined this phrase, which springs, obviously, from the better-established, more familiar labels “environmental philosophy,” or “environmental humanities.” By *philology* I mean simply the methods and materials that comprise the multidisciplinary field of Classics, which is the study of ancient Greek and Roman literature and culture in all its facets. Why this approach? Many ecologists and environmentalists find Western values (i.e., Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian) at fault for our current crises and advocate for a shift to aboriginal or “Eastern” attitudes toward Nature. I’m all for Eastern and aboriginal values. What this study aims to reveal, however, is how rooted systems and sustainability thinking is in the so-called Western tradition. One of the keener contemporary analysts of that tradition, acclaimed philosopher

and anthropologist of science Bruno Latour, argues that untangling the intricate (and urgent) problem of human beings' environmental impact on the planet will require "sensitivity," which he defines in terms of systems science as "detecting and reacting rapidly to small changes, influences, signals." Organisms that lack sensitivity to the Earth's changes, influences, and signals, Latour asserts, are doomed. As far as global climate change is concerned, the Greeks and Romans have bequeathed to us both the enigma and its solution: Pre-industrialized, pre-digital, precapitalist, pre-reductionist, pre-postmodern – the ancients necessarily lived closer and with greater sensitivity to both the perils and prospects of their environments. As inheritors of their legacy, we have much to relearn from them, and not only from their mistakes.¹

If this book succeeds in any way in articulating this point, it is thanks in no small degree to the kindness, interest, and intelligence of many colleagues and friends who have helped shape my thinking. (None of whom, of course, is responsible for any mistakes or misjudgments on my part, be they innocent or impertinent.) At the beginning of his *Meditations*, whose proper title in Greek would have been something like "Notes to Self," the emperor Marcus Aurelius lists by name the many people in his life to whom he felt indebted and thankful for various things. Here is my exordium in that vein.²

Persons: My parents; above all, my wife, Caroline; our children: Gawain, Estlin, and Isaiah; Richard Seaford; Richard Martin; Barbara Graziosi; David Konstan; Bill Falls; John Franklin; Bob Bartlett; Father Mariano Dell'Omo; Bob Taylor; Stefano Fassone and Elisabeth De Coster; Lilah Grace and Mirko Canevaro; Peter Struck; Dennis Clougherty; Joanna Oh; David Teegarden; Ashwin Paranjpe; Maggie Eppstein; Ben Lazarus and Liz Cohen; Nick Saul; John Dillon; Eric Bishop-von Wettberg; Donncha O'Rourke; Christopher Star; Michael Carroll; Malcolm Crowe; Anna Dorofeeva; Nicholas Rescher; James Armstrong; Michael Sharp; Douglas Cairns; Norman Sandridge; Katharine Earnshaw; Eric Zencey; Antonello Borra; Benjamin Pickford; Nathan Sanders; Sarah Daw; Dennis Mahoney; Carol MacDonald; Gregory Nagy; Brian Walsh; Carolyn Higbie; Cristina Mazzoni; John Van Buren; Amy Seidl; Baird Callicott; Ted Champlin; Jacques Bailly; Laura Slatkin; Z. Philip Ambrose; Chris Faraone; Tracey McCowen; Bob Kaster; Adrian Ivakhiv; Frank Zelko; Anthony Grudin; Cami Davis; Philip Thibodeau; students in the Honors College and Earth and Environment Scholars Program at the University of Vermont; Michael J. Tomas III; Brendan Fisher; Neville Morley; Jesse Lundquist; Dona

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Brown; Zachary Nowak; the Fathers and Brothers at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert; the Mothers and Sisters at Abbey Regina Laudis.

Institutions: The Loeb Classical Library Foundation (Trustees of Harvard University); The Center for Hellenic Studies, Washington, DC (Harvard University); The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh; The Institute of Advanced Studies, Durham University; The National Endowment for the Humanities; The American Academy in Rome; The National University of Singapore, Department of Philosophy; Bryn Mawr College, Department of Classics; Davis Family Library, Middlebury College; The Umbra Institute's Center for Sustainability and Food Studies, Perugia, Italy; The Faculty Resource Network at New York University; Mahindra United World College; at The University of Vermont: The College of Arts and Sciences, The Humanities Center, The Environmental Program, the Ian Worley Award Fund, The Office of the Vice President for Research.

I would also like to thank Pam Scholefield for creating the index, and Alwyn Harrison for superb copy-editing.

*

If anyone understood and embraced a systems view of life and cultivated the dispositions and attitudes that foster sustainable living (the topics of this book), it was the Emperor Stoic. I take the liberty of rendering two relevant passages from Marcus here to set the scene. I think I translate fairly, but with a view also to the argument of the ensuing pages.

Everything is interwoven and the resulting mesh is sacred; almost nothing is unrelated to any other thing; it all self-organizes; everything orders itself together to create a single cosmos. The world is a unity sprung from multiplicity. (*Meditations* 7.9)³

To the extent that I remind myself I am a part of this kind of whole, I shall be quite content with all that occurs. To the degree I feel related to those parts that are akin to me, I will do nothing that is not in the interest of what we all share; rather, I will focus on those parts to which I am related and will direct all my energy to the advantage of our common weal. (*Meditations* 10.6.2)⁴

Note on Sources and Citation

My general approach to citation has been to keep things simple and the system of reference unobtrusive. Instead of footnotes I use endnotes. These generally serve the purpose of indicating the source of an idea or quotation in the body of the text in case the reader wants to check it or pursue it further. Occasionally, I have added a further comment or qualification or the original phrasing from a primary source in Greek or Latin where I felt it was important to the argument. Each reference within a given endnote includes a descriptive tag, followed by a colon, that links the information specifically to the discussion in the main text.

I tend to be generous with quotation in the text body, and eclectic in the use of sources. This is partly a residual effect of some previous work on cento poetry and quotation, but due also perhaps to a more general, temperamental fondness for the aesthetic and communicative power of pastiche.

There is no bibliography *per se*; full reference to works cited appear in the notes, with subsequent citations from the same work given by author, editor, and/or short title. To have provided a separate bibliography would give the wrong impression, as my purpose in writing was never to be comprehensive, much less to pretend to be definitive or authoritative. There are generous relevant bibliographies in, for example, Callicott and Van Buren, *Greek Natural Philosophy: The Presocratics and Their Importance for Environmental Philosophy* (Cognella, 2017) and in Egerton's *Roots of Ecology: Antiquity to Haeckel* (University of California Press, 2012), to which the interested reader is referred. There are many things I read that did not find their way into the book. On the other hand, there are doubtless many things I did not read (or was not aware of), but perhaps should have. This seemed to me an inevitable trade-off and an acceptable risk. I followed sources in the direction an idea seemed to be leading.

Note on Sources and Citation

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For Greek and Latin texts, the editions in the Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press) generally suffice for most purposes. Where a text does not have a Loeb, I indicate the edition used. Where textual problems and variant readings are at issue, these are noted and discussed as needed. For Anaximander and Heraclitus, I expressly use the new Loeb and its method of numbering the fragments and testimonia, which is entirely different from the older edition of Diels-Kranz. The new Loeb, I think, is bound to become the new standard, and will certainly be more easily accessible to the general reader. That said, while I use the Loeb's texts for ancient authors, all translations are my own or adapted from others', unless indicated otherwise.

For classicist readers, I hope I have not stretched credulity or taxed anyone's patience unduly; I am aware there are other ways our materials can be handled than the way I've handled them here. Scientists and specialists in particular areas will immediately see I am no scientist or specialist; I hope you will not judge me too harshly for it. One of the delights in writing this book was to discover how deeply humanistic and broadly learned the hard sciences can be. To philosophers I might say exactly the same. And to the general reader I apologize in advance for any discipline-specific *arcana*, terminology, things taken for granted, and the inevitable Greek and Latin that lingers here. I don't think any of that will prove an impediment to comprehension – or, I hope, to enjoyment. I honestly had you in mind above all and have done my level best to say something that might interest you.

Finally, a word about the word Nature: I decided to capitalize it. It is of course a slippery term whose various uses for various purposes are all problematic, for various reasons. I discuss some of the issues involved in the Introduction and Chapter 1. By capitalizing it, I suppose I'm invoking it as a category and inviting readers to impute for themselves, relying on their own knowledge base, whatever connotation the particular context calls for. Usually what I mean by it is simply “the natural, nonhuman world.”

Preliminary thoughts on topics explored in this book were published in two pieces for *Arion: A Journal for Humanities and the Classics*: “(Great) Works & (Long) Days: Hesiod in Reception” (2017) and “Classics and Complexity in *Walden's* ‘Spring’” (2019).

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