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## Book Review | *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas*

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***Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas.* David Macauley; Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010; xi + 433 pages; \$26.95 paperback; 978-1-4384-3244-1**

Looking occasionally to the East and primarily to the West, over centuries, through mythology, literature, cosmology and philosophy, David Macauley's immense book *Elemental Philosophy*, is an homage to a different and seemingly unfamiliar sensibility in which earth, air, fire and water (as well as rock, wood, ice, cloud, temperature, light, night, and space that appear as interstices) animate human thought and action. It is, at times, a beautiful, informative and transformative meditation on how to interpret and live with the natural world. Macauley draws primarily on ancient Greek philosophy and on more recent continental philosophical writing, but this is not a work that is only historical. He also discusses contemporary environmental philosophers and nature writers and his often lyrical reflections occasionally and surprisingly challenge contemporary thinking about our place in the more than human world.

The book is divided into three sections. The first, "Elemental Encounters and Ideas" re-familiarizes us with the four elements and provides a ranging account of the philosophical frameworks of meanings for each. "After locating some of the fundamental forms in which the elements express themselves" (p. 60) Macauley explores non-Western elemental experiences in a sweeping discussion that illuminates classical contrasts, cultural comparisons, creation myths, and social construction of the elements as we encounter them in sex, marriage, love, hate, war, justice, and metaphysics (all this within thirty pages!). While this chapter may leave one a bit breathless, there is a particularly interesting and amusing discussion buried in the middle of the chapter about why there

might be four elements. He notes that there are four seasons, four directions, four bases in DNA, four basic forces in physics, four chambers of the heart, four sides to a square. In Hindu there are four stages of life, four castes, and four paths. The OM in Buddhism is composed of the four states of consciousness. He speculates that framing (fouring) that which is cosmologically, politically, socially, or environmentally wild or bewildering is a way of lending intelligibility to that which may escape our understanding. And while fours appear again and again throughout the book, there is a playful self-consciousness here – Macauley doesn't want his focus on the four elements to be viewed as reductive or reifying (which explains, in part, the interstices).

The second section contains in depth discussions of “Elemental Theories” in four chapters. The first explores Empedocle's thought, the second Plato's, and the last two Aristotle's. Though these chapters provide detailed discussions of classical Greek texts, Macauley enlivens the discussion with appearances from Rachel Carson, Barry Commoner, Milan Kundera, as well as “nature philosophers” such as Alfred Whitehead and Murray Bookchin, among others.

The final section, “Elemental Worlds” contains three chapters. The first on domestication explores how human relationships with the elements have transformed them and us. Here, Macauley presents a brief outline, in four parts, of his/story of the elements: “First, earth, fire, air and water appear in the mythic and religious perspectives of the ancient[s]...In a second, and largely Greek phase...they are incorporated into more rational frameworks by Presocratic thinkers...before being taken up by Plato and Aristotle within the context of physics, philosophy, and cosmology.” In the third stage “through the Middle Ages into modernity, earth, air, fire, and water are displaced or diminished in major ways as explanatory phenomena.” (p. 277) Macauley ends this chapter with a discussion of this third phase before turning to the fourth phase “contemporary outcroppings of the elements and elemental phenomena within Continental philosophy” in the next chapter. The work of Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Levinas, Irigary, and others are taken up there as the elements of earth, fire, air, and water are transformed into the elemental, an adjectival form. In the final chapter, “Revaluing Earth, Air, Fire and Water” we finally get to issues of more pressing environmental concern.

The text is quite rich and evocative and there is much to unpack and explore, but I will restrict myself to four comments.

Let me first take the interstices out of the parentheses that I have them in above. An interstice is the space that is between things, an intervening space that is usually empty. Macauley's interstices are far from empty; each musing highlights the stuff that fills our worlds. Weaving together historical and scientific understanding, autobiographical and literary stories, and cross-cultural meanings, Macauley lovingly infuses the text with

elements beyond and between the four, and provides readers with an opportunity to look anew at the connections among the elements themselves and our own lives intertwined with them. These interstices are gems.

Macauley's chapter on Empedocles is another gem. I am not particularly familiar with the writings of the Pre-Socratics and haven't really thought about them since graduate school, but I found this chapter so seductive I am planning to go read the poems. By Macauley's telling, Empedocles provides the elemental roots of ecological sensibility (roots are obviously important throughout the text and inspired the book cover – a gorgeous photograph of a Banyan tree taken by Macauley). Empedocles had a radical take on justice, equality, pollution, and on human relations to other animals and plants. Macauley notes affinities between Empedocles' thought and that of Ernst Haeckel and Peter Kropotkin, the former coined the term "ecology", the latter had a vision of nature as predominated by mutual aid, rather than the more common nineteenth century idea that nature was red in tooth and claw. Empedocles viewed humans, animals, and the rest of the natural world on a par; there was no moral hierarchy, no pinnacle upon which humans could place themselves. Macauley argues that, "Empedocles helped to inaugurate an eco-philosophical tradition that continues to inform present day thought." (122). The inauguration is imagined, rather than actual, as I am certain very few contemporary eco-philosophers have much familiarity with Empedocles, but after reading this chapter, many will look back at his writings with wonder.

While Empedocles is credited with engaging in environmental action, there is not much in this big book that is ostensibly committed to revaluing the elements that encourages or recommends particular action and this for me was a disappointment. Consider water: according to the World Water Council 1.1 billion people live without clean drinking water, 2.6 billion people lack adequate sanitation and 3 900 children die every day from water borne diseases. Macauley notes these problems in passing (he devotes 3 paragraphs to the issue), but doesn't say much about what to do. This is one of the biggest problems with work that focuses too heavily on historical and theoretical musings about the environment. Elements, like water, become metaphors for ideas and the fact that the planet is experiencing a severe water crisis, an environmental problem as large as climate change, gets lost in playful profundity.

Which leads me to my fourth thought – it is unclear who this book was written for, who the audience for this work might be and in what context it is meant to be read. I doubt the text will be taken up by environmental studies students or scholars who are engaged in practical environmental concerns, whether by asking policy questions, engaging in scientific explorations, recommending ethical or political actions, or figuring out ways to communicate environmental issues well. It may be of interest to a small number of continental philosophers who are interested in thinking about the environment. Perhaps there are some who work in ethics who will take up the challenge of developing an

elemental ethic, something that Macauley suggests would “necessitate a more open attitude toward our surroundings, encouraging, when possible, exposure or even vulnerability to the wind, waters, rock, ice, heat, snow and light without at the same time asking us to surrender unduly a semblance of safety.” (337) Such an ethic, were one to develop it, may start by examining the privilege of those who can choose to open themselves while remembering that most of the people in the world have no choice but to endure their vulnerability and insecurity in the face of powerfully changing elements.