

BOOK REVIEW: THE THEORETICAL UNCERTAINTY OF NATURE IN BADIOU'S *MÉDITATION SUR LE CONCEPT DE NATURE*

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BOOK UNDER REVIEW: Alain Badiou, *Méditation sur le concept de nature*, Paris, Climats, 2025.

ABSTRACT: This review examines Alain Badiou's *Méditation sur le concept de nature*, focusing on his analysis of nature's conceptual instability. Badiou's dialectical analysis of nature and his discussion of Kant and Hegel on nature as totality offer valuable resources for a systematic framing of the problem. However, his refusal of the concept of nature in this volume demands closer scrutiny. I suggest that rather than becoming obsolescent, the instability in the concept of nature persists in contemporary scientific, artistic, and political contexts. Indeed, the concept of nature remains open to its uncertainty between natural history and human action and thus cannot be reduced to a mere negativity.

KEYWORDS: Nature; Badiou; Natural philosophy; Objectivity; Climate change

Is defining the concept of nature a central philosophical task today? Badiou's *Méditation sur le concept de nature* offers a reflection on this problem through a dialectical analysis of the concept's displacements within the philosophical canon. In a moment where the binaries between the natural and the social world are increasingly put into question, this intervention surprisingly does not propose a concept of nature but rather advocates for its dissolution. Through a dialectical reconstruction, Badiou identifies a 'theoretical uncertainty' internal to the concept of nature which he articulates in the form of potential challenges to its definition in the conclusion. The book closes with an uncompromising claim: the internal inconsistencies of the concept of nature and its absence in the exterior conditions of philosophy —art, the sciences and politics— are signs of its

exhaustion. Badiou's hypothesis, then, is that the concept of nature has no active power for philosophy today. What remains unanswered is how the significance of this rejection is to be understood given the urgency, in the present context, of cultivating a more reflexive relationship to collective life and the natural world.

The volume is divided into three parts: an analysis of the concept's trajectory through the history of philosophy—which Badiou calls a 'snail' (*escargot*) or 'spiral'—; a hypothetical set of questions and answers; and the concluding remarks. In the first part, Badiou walks us through the determinations of nature across eight dialectics: nature and being, essence, the sensible, the totality, freedom, the human, the 'overhuman,' and God. The second part analyzes the problem of nature in Kant and Hegel, addressing the issues arising from the presupposition of nature as the totality of phenomena. After drawing attention to its inconsistencies and to what he characterises as its defensive and ultimately ineffective character, Badiou concludes that there is no space for the concept of nature in contemporary philosophy.

In this review, I frame the instability of the concept of nature through the eight moments of its dialectics. Upon identifying the tensions that render the concept unstable in the first part of the book, I consider Badiou's reading of Kant and Hegel in the second section, particularly as he addresses the problem of nature as totality. I argue that while Badiou's dialectical reconstruction of the concept of nature provides resources to systematically produce the problem of nature, his rejection of the concept is one-sided and insufficiently justified. I expand on the reasons for a critical assessment of his main claim in the final section of this essay. Rather than a mere negation of the concept, the theoretical instability of nature persists in the contemporary conditions of philosophy. The uncertainty of nature remains open to its tensions between natural history and human intervention and thus cannot be reduced to a mere negative movement.

Badiou begins the book by presenting the displacements of the concept of nature throughout the eight dialectics. In this section, he accomplishes a coherent reconstruction of a key and elusive problem in the history of philosophy. This demonstration not only illustrates how nature accrues significance through supplementary terms, but also captures the inherent contradictions of these theoretical contexts. In the first of eight dialectics, nature is paired with the concept of being. Drawing on Lucretius' *De natura rerum*, the positing of the atoms and the void as the nature of things leads to the problem of the *definition of the*

nature of the atoms and the void themselves. Here, instability emerges from the procedure that defines nature *through* nature. Such a duplication of nature in turn calls for the *clinamen* understood as the trans-natural element that completes the equation. From here, whenever nature defines what a thing is, it renders a thing thinkable and thus becomes its essence. Consequently, in the second dialectic, nature becomes this effective presentation of essence: it is posited as the sensible and thus exteriorises essence. These developments establish two difficulties faced by a philosophical definition of nature: doubling and circularity. On the one hand, to define nature, one must state the definition of nature; on the other, the concept of nature tends to be circular insofar as the concepts that define nature themselves require explanation.

Moving on to the third dialectic, Badiou notes that whenever considered as sensible, nature exhibits a certain indifference towards us. He explores potential responses to the indifference of nature in Pascal, Sade, French Romanticism and Bergson. Ultimately, the third dialectic shows that whenever essence is externalised, nature appears as the *totality* of the sensible. The tensions emerging from the concept of nature as totality inform the rejection of the concept in Badiou's conclusions and thus require our special attention. It is important to recall that across the three volumes of *Being and Event*, Badiou articulates a mathematical-ontological rejection of the concept of totality. For Badiou, what renders the concept of totality unsuitable for ontology is the paradoxical and inconsistent character of the concept in set theory. The fourth dialectic establishes that, given the assumption of nature as totality, one must determine whether nature itself is presented in nature. Drawing on this affirmation, Badiou remarks that nature does not present itself in nature unless one adopts the Hegelian "protocol" (46), which presupposes the natural totality through the movement of totalisation. But what is the criterion for this movement of totalisation? Through a diagonal relation, Badiou connects nature and the totality with the eighth dialectic, characterised by the dyad of nature and God. In this diagonal, the concept of God exposes the 'who' for whom nature is presented as a totality.

If nature is paired with the totality in the fourth dialectic, the fifth dialectic raises the problem of whether the natural totality implies something *other* with respect to itself. If the totality is coherent and necessary, the question then becomes whether freedom is thinkable. Against Hegel and Spinoza, Badiou

characterises the totalisation of nature as inadequate to grasping freedom: if nature is totalized, freedom remains a subordinate term to the necessity of the totality. So, because the natural totality cannot think freedom, freedom must designate the anti-natural. Sartre, Kant, the theory of miracles in Pascal and the idea of grace in Malebranche offer the resources to discuss the figure of exceptionality with respect to the natural totality. At this point, the dialectical sequence begins to move from freedom and the natural totality to the identification of freedom with the human. In the transition into the sixth dialectic, Badiou fully addresses this movement in order to argue that if freedom constitutes the nature of human beings, then it can be naturalised in the human.

The reconciliation of nature and freedom in the human is followed by a discussion of Rousseau and the idea of natural rights in the sixth dialectic. However, the paradoxes of nature, freedom and the human suggest that if the human overcomes its own nature through freedom, then it appears as divided between the sensible and the supersensible. In short, nature may be thus overcome through the path of ‘overhumanity’ (*surhumanité*) (65). Accordingly, the seventh dialectic explores these tensions by examining a problem in Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*: whether the accomplishment of Nietzsche’s overman lies in an order of natural continuity or essential discontinuity vis-à-vis the human. Even if the natural determination of the human is to be overcome by the overman, the problem becomes the degree to which the passage *itself* is natural. The dialectical sequence thus discloses that the determinations of nature advance a concept beyond the problems of doubling and circularity, and also avoid creating a realm of the non-natural which introduces a gap between nature and its other.

The final pairing of nature with God results from the movement of the human to the overman understood as an ultra-human horizon. A final problem emerges here: whenever nature is posited as God, the question of whether God stands in continuity with, or in a radical discontinuity with nature. As a result, to the problems of doubling, circularity and the disjuncture with the non-natural, we must add a final challenge. If, as a response to the disjuncture with the non-natural, a definition of nature introduces a figure of unity, how do we identify the results of a continuous and purely immanent force? Badiou opposes Spinoza’s ‘continuist’ thesis to Descartes. Unlike the immanentist solution, Badiou’s Descartes sees no intelligibility of the creation through the concept of God.

Leibniz is briefly noted as an ‘intermediate’ position: for him, the creation of the world is posited as contingent and thus discontinuous with respect to God, yet the already created world must be the best possible world and thus continuous with God.

Before turning to the second part of the book, it is worth acknowledging two merits of the spiral analysis of nature. In the first part of the book, Badiou is successful in avoiding the pitfalls of a historicist reading, which would simply situate nature without accounting for its internal inconsistencies and displacements. By presenting a logical sequence through canonical figures, the dialectical structure of the investigation also resists the limits of a purely formal reading of the problem, which might overlook the context of the concept’s production and present its iterations as arbitrary. To be clear, this route taken through the history of philosophy might be questioned in terms of its choices and selectiveness, but the methodology of confronting the question in that history nonetheless effectively exposes the dynamics of the problem. It is precisely because of the systematic construction of nature that Badiou’s rejection of the concept in the conclusions of the book astonishingly interrupts his dialectical argument.

As I noted above, the spiral analysis reveals that concept of nature is unstable; its problematic character is constructible in a logical sequence but remains contextual. The second section explores this insight in greater detail through an imagined exchange with potential readers. Badiou begins with a brief commentary on the problem of natural numbers and proceeds to an extensive discussion of the concept of nature in Hegel and Kant. The main contribution of this section is to circumscribe a tension between nature as what is given—or objectified—, on the one hand, and as the activity that provides the reason for objectivation, on the other. This discussion revisits debates from earlier moments in Badiou’s theoretical production—notably *Logics of Worlds* and *Theory of the Subject*—on Hegel’s Doctrine of Essence and the question of internalisation and externalization in the sections on the concept of ground. It also offers a renewed reading of sections of the Analogies of Experience, the Antinomies of Pure Reason and the Transcendental Analytic, complementing Badiou’s engagement with Kant’s critical apparatus in *A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*, the seminar *The One*, and *Logics of Worlds*.

In Badiou's overall argument, the focus on Kant and Hegel responds to their association of nature with the conceptual space of existence, totality and the phenomenon. This association lays the terrain for an inquiry into the paradoxes of nature as totality. While in Badiou's reconstruction of nature in Kant, the totality of phenomena presupposes a distinction between *nature* and the *world*, Hegel's distinction between *ground* and *grounded* (interiority and exteriority) in the *Science of the Logic* provides the existence of the totality of phenomena. Hegel outlines the problem of the mediation between the active and the passive dimensions of nature, where the internal becomes necessarily externalised. Nature is an immanent force that is deployed, that is, externalised as a totality. Thus, in Badiou's reconstruction of Hegel's discussion of the concept of ground, the world is a moment of nature. While the discussion of Hegel points to the tensions of the world as a moment of nature and the externalisation of nature, Badiou's discussion of Kant's seeks to identify a displacement in the meaning of nature in the Antinomies of Pure Reason. Between the cosmological and the physico-theological proofs, the meaning of nature oscillates between the identity of nature and world, on the one hand, and the 'marvels of the nature,' on the other. If the cosmological proof seeks a principle for the order, in the 'marvels of nature,' a creative power must index an excess that is not captured by the laws of nature. Hence, the physico-theological proof alludes to a dynamic power that cannot be grasped by the cosmic order. Badiou concludes his discussion of Kant by revisiting the Transcendental Analytic and reconstructing a definition of nature as the temporal presentation of objects in time — a definition that contrasts with nature understood as any specific empirical content.

Badiou is not optimistic about the attempts to advance a consistent response to these problems. As I have described, the first part of the book unfolds the theoretical uncertainty of the concept of nature throughout the 'spiral' of its conceptual displacements. Importantly, Badiou constructs a tension through Hegel and Kant between the objectified dimensions of the concept that encompass what we see as 'natural history'; and a more active sense which refers to the forces that crystallise nature as it appears. This productive dialectic is unilaterally closed towards the end, when Badiou insists that the arts, science and politics have an exclusively negative approach to nature. After an instructive and systematic construction of the problem, the book's conclusion is abrupt: the

concept of nature is exhausted as irrelevant to philosophy today. Against this closure, I want to suggest that rather than a mere negation of the concept, its theoretical instability persists as a symptom of the tensions between nonhuman nature and the sustainability of life on the planet.

The book ends by briefly arguing that the concept of nature has been emptied by its defensive implementation and by its apparent absence in the conditions of philosophy. In poetry, Badiou describes the concept of nature as active, but only negatively. He succinctly points to how, “after post-romanticism or after symbolism” (152), nature is a potential reservoir of the intemporal and a reference for a subjective configuration, both as a figure of suffering and of ectasis. Poetry, Badiou notes, also positions nature as the non-existent, in a melancholic gesture. In support of the abandonment of nature, Badiou indicates that in ecological politics, nature is defensively mobilised against industrial development and technology. Although seemingly active, nature is positioned by ecological politics in a pure negative, resistant, form. He complements this idea by establishing that science has abandoned the concept of nature – as well as other adjacent concepts such as matter and life. Across these practices the verdict is undisputed: we witness the impoverishment and slow disappearance of the concept. This verdict contrasts with the recurring crises resulting from the disruptions between non-human and human nature under capitalist socio-economic constraints. How might we articulate the mediation between natural history and human action as it resonates in the physical world? Badiou hardly problematizes this important tension in philosophy or its conditions.

Undeniably, looking for a definition of ‘nature’ in the sciences is not a promising task; at least not if we seek in science a normative ground that stabilises the concept for its philosophical analysis. That said, Badiou’s discussion of the sciences fixates on the problem of the *definition* of nature without capturing the degree to which scientific practices produce knowledge which readily transforms the field of philosophical intervention. Far from prescribing stable terms ready for philosophical adoption, the sciences indeed contribute to philosophical practice understood as a strategic and supporting effort for climate politics. Most importantly, as we confront rising seas, burning forests, and uprooted communities, it is perhaps more crucial than ever to articulate the theoretical uncertainty of the concept of nature at the intersection of science and politics. In

this regard, Badiou's strange characterization of climate politics is difficult to endorse. Although normative assumptions about nature guide certain strands of ecological thought, his tenuous remarks on the unsophisticated analysis of technology and science by ecological critique fall short of recognizing the dialogue between ecological critique and scientific practices. Even more plainly, they fail to identify the contradictions of discourses advocating the increase in productivity and industry for a warming atmosphere. Badiou rightly points to the limits of the fixed opposition between nature against technology, but he does not provide any hints or realistic options for technological development in a human and ecologically sustainable transition. Finally, the resolute claim that contemporary arts exclusively negate nature is not extensively justified in the book, and it would be clearly challenged not only —and perhaps more obviously— by the current proliferation of forms of environmental art, but also in more nuanced approaches that reimagine nature beyond its one-sided absence.

The book reconstructs a key problem through a coherent methodology and captures important patterns in the significance of the concept of nature. Moreover, this analysis constructs a renewed approach to the problem through the dialectics between nature as *presented* or *objectified*, on the one hand, and as the *activity grounding objectivation*, on the other. Yet the conclusion fails to address how the theoretical uncertainty of nature manifests in the current conjuncture. We might not need to provide a new definition of nature, and a key philosophical task might certainly not consist in looking for a *coherent* definition of nature in other practices. To engage the problem in its own terms, however, does not necessarily yield a definition; it rather requires embracing the concept's inherent instability working through its underlying problematic position in the present.

Where Badiou identifies an absence, we must insist on the dialectical contradictions of the problem as it manifests our contemporary crises and strategies for mitigation and adaptation. After all, attention to nature as a *problem* should lead to a more robust theoretical analysis of the position of human and non-human life with respect to the goals of decarbonisation and climate action. Nature appears at the center of our questions about the articulation of natural history and our ability to produce new, less devastating forms of natural constraints. Our actions play out in the context of a long natural history that involves a more than human world, whether or not we recognize or consider this

conflict explicitly. These dialectical tensions might not lead to a concept, but, as is evident, they certainly require attention on all fronts. *Méditation sur le concept de nature* rightly points in the direction of the contradictions of the concept of nature. The rejection of nature, however, sidesteps the dilemmas of an unresolved crisis which at present shows no signs of abating.

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