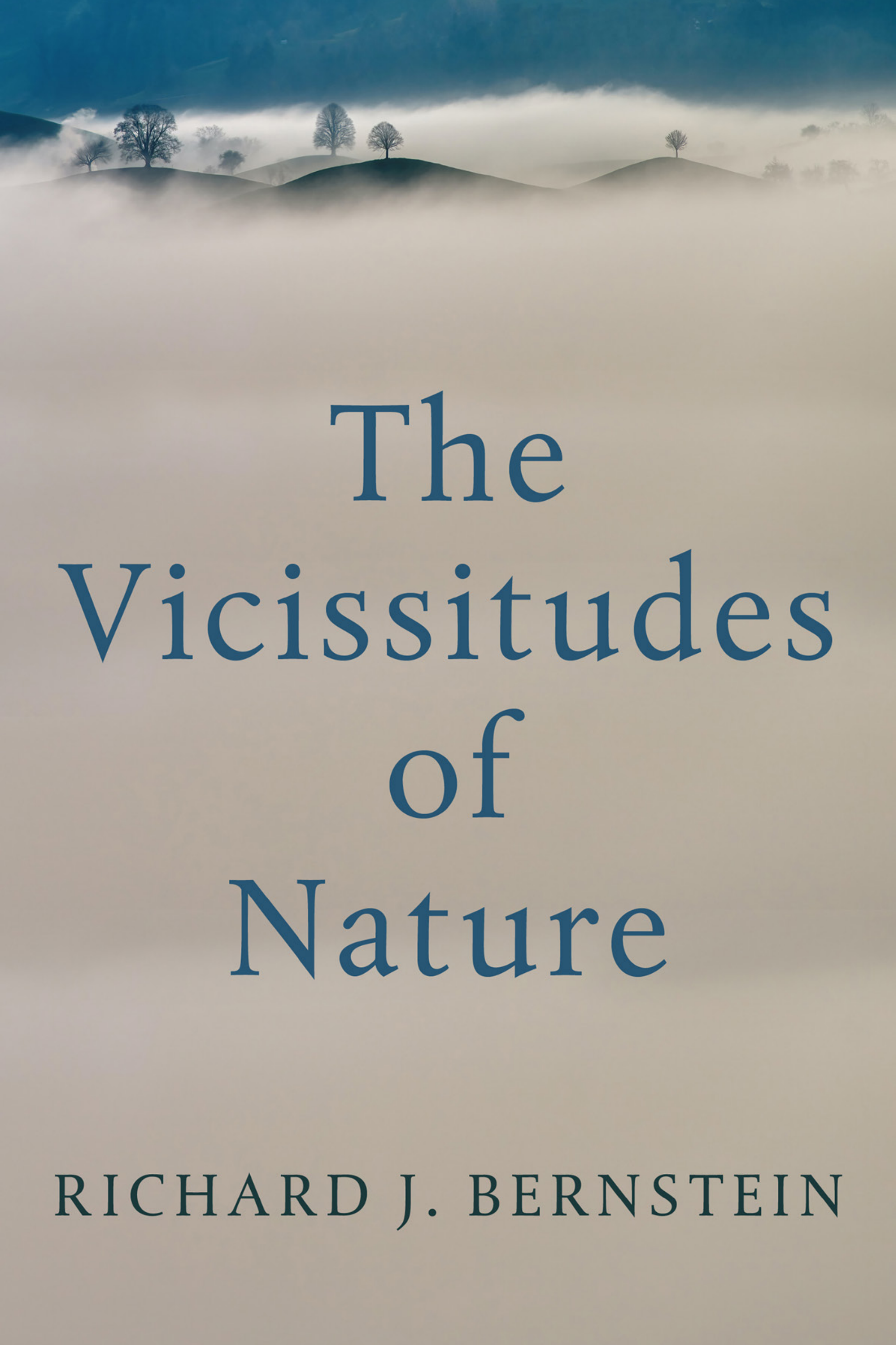
The Vicissitudes of Nature
RICHARD J. BERNSTEIN

The Vicissitudes of Nature

In memory of my friend and colleague Yirmiyahu Yovel,
whose writings on Spinoza and the Marranos inspired this book

The Vicissitudes of Nature

From Spinoza to Freud

Richard J. Bernstein

polity

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Preface

When I started this project, I was frequently asked how I became interested in the theme. Why did I decide to write a book about the vicissitudes of nature from Spinoza to Freud? Initially, my answer was vague because it is only in working out my ideas that I discover what I want to say. Actually, there are several strands in the story of writing this book – some dating back to the time when I was a graduate student at Yale. One of the exciting features of graduate school is the discussion groups that arise spontaneously. At Yale, John E. Smith, a philosopher who specialized in American philosophy, organized a small discussion group dealing with John Dewey's *Experience and Nature*. At the time, I shared many of the prevalent prejudices about Dewey's pragmatism – that it was superficial and not really a "serious" candidate for philosophy. (These prejudices were reinforced when I was an undergraduate at the Hutchins College at the University of Chicago, where Dewey's pragmatism was taken as an example of "bad" philosophy.) Reading *Experience and Nature* was a revelation. Dewey's book did not fit the stereotypes of pragmatism that were so prevalent at the time. Dewey's naturalistic vision of the relation of experience and nature – how human beings as natural creatures are related to the rest of nature – spoke deeply to me. Dewey challenged all metaphysical and epistemological dichotomies; he argued for an enriched (naturalistic Hegelian) conception of experience that is continuous with the rest of nature. I decided to write my dissertation on Dewey, "John Dewey's Metaphysics of Experience." Since those early days, I have explored a variety of themes and thinkers, but my early enthusiasm for Dewey's naturalistic vision never left me.[1]

During the first decades of the twentieth century, Dewey was part of a movement of American philosophers who identified themselves as naturalists. They were all deeply influenced by Darwin and the new biology, as well as by the social sciences. With the growing influence of analytic philosophy, the significance of this naturalistic movement was overshadowed – relegated to the "dustbin of history." However, in the mid-twentieth century there was a revival of the new forms of naturalism, stimulated by the work of W. V. O. Quine and Wilfrid Sellars, which had little to do with the American naturalists and more to do with an assessment of the natural sciences and their relation to philosophy.[2] By the later decades of the twentieth century – indeed, right up to the present – most Anglophone philosophers consider themselves naturalists. The contemporary discussion of naturalism has been extremely chaotic, with little agreement about the meaning and scope of the term "naturalism." In my monograph, *Pragmatic Naturalism: John Dewey's Living Legacy*, I work through these debates. Initially, I was struck by the fact that many philosophers were speaking at cross-purposes, but gradually I began to discover a coherent development. A number of analytic philosophers and philosophers of science have been developing a sophisticated version of liberal pragmatic naturalism that is very much in the spirit of Dewey. Consequently, the thesis of my monograph is that the legacy of Dewey's naturalism is very much alive – informed by a new analytic sophistication.

In writing my monograph, I also discovered that many contemporary philosophers are ignorant of the rich debates (pro and con) about the concept of nature and viable forms of naturalism that have been prevalent since the beginning of the modern age.[3] The great discovery for me was Spinoza. Like many contemporary thinkers, I thought of Spinoza as a historical curiosity who proposed a grand metaphysical scheme that is no longer viable in light of criticisms advanced by such thinkers as Hume, Kant, and Hegel. Nevertheless, when I turned to the details of his thinking about nature, I discovered a richness of insight that is relevant to contemporary philosophical debates. In my view, although Descartes was the "father" of modern philosophy, Spinoza was clearly the "father" of modern naturalism. I then followed the twists and turns in the vicissitudes of nature in Hume, Kant, and Hegel. In the nineteenth century, there was something like an intellectual volcanic eruption when the three "masters of the school of suspicion" – Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud – raised critical questions about the viability of a philosophy of nature. Each, in a radically different way, sought to elaborate new ways of thinking about nature that raised provocative critical questions about the relation of human beings and nature.

I fully realize that in carrying out such an ambitious project, questions can always be raised about which thinkers are included or excluded from my primary discussions. For example, one may ask (as a reviewer of my manuscript did ask) why I begin with Spinoza rather than Descartes. After all, Spinoza himself began his philosophizing with reflections on Descartes and debates about Cartesianism. Consequently, a good argument can be made that to achieve a deeper understanding of Spinoza, one should begin with his appropriation and critique of Cartesian themes. I agree with this. Indeed, such a discussion would supplement and enrich my study. But doing this in a historically accurate and thorough manner would have resulted in a very different book.

Another reviewer wondered why I did not spend my time on Schelling's famous philosophy of nature. Schelling is now enjoying a resurgence of contemporary interest. Even in my present narrative, Schelling's insights about nature play a crucial role in challenging mechanistic conceptions of nature and insisting that nature is dynamic and alive. However, following out the rethinking of nature as a vital dynamic force would also require a detailed examination of German idealism. Such an exploration would also enrich my narrative but would require a different book. In focusing on Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, I have used my judgment to present a balanced narrative of the vicissitudes of nature during the modern period – well aware that I might have explored other thinkers.

I started this project well before the pandemic. Like many scholars, I encountered a major obstacle in March 2020. I no longer had access to the books in my office. The libraries of The New School and NYU were closed temporarily. Fortunately, I have had a superb research assistant, Olga Knizhnik, who located digital copies of all the primary and secondary sources I needed to continue my research. In addition, Olga carefully edited my manuscript and supervised a team of graduate students who checked the accuracy of all my quotations and references. The team included Agnese Di Riccio, Tatiana Llaguno Nieves, and Veronica Padilla. I would never have been able to complete this manuscript without the help of Olga and the other superb New School graduate students. My acknowledgment of their dedicated assistance is much greater than it would have been if there had not been the pandemic. I am grateful for the meticulous copy editing of Jean van Altena. Finally, I want to acknowledge the dedicated support and encouragement of the editor of Polity Press, John Thompson. He has always been an enthusiastic supporter of my work. He made a number of excellent suggestions for improving the quality of my

manuscript. Despite the many problems I had to face writing this book, it has been both an intense and enjoyable experience – intense because of the amount of material I had to master; enjoyable because I learned something new every day.

Introduction

I

In his illuminating essay "The Charm of Naturalism," Barry Stroud perceptively remarks,

> The idea of "nature," or "natural objects or relations, or modes of investigation that are "naturalistic," has been applied more widely, at more different times and places, and for more different purposes than probably any other notion in the whole history of human thought. . . . What is usually at issue is not whether to be "naturalistic" or not, but rather what is and what is not to be included in one's conception of "nature." That is the real question, and that is what leads to deep disagreement. (Stroud 2004: 21–2)

He then notes, "[The] pressure on the one hand [is] to include more and more within your conception of 'nature,' so it loses its distinctiveness and restrictiveness. Or, if the conception is kept fixed and restrictive, there is the pressure on the other hand to distort or even to deny the very phenomena that a naturalistic study – and especially a naturalistic study of human beings – is supposed to explain" (Stroud 2004: 22). Stroud makes a number of important points. The reflection and speculation about the nature of nature has been a primary theme in Western thinking (as well as in other traditions) since its very beginning with the pre-Socratics – and the conception of nature has varied tremendously through the tradition. There are two opposing pressures on thinking about nature: an expansive pressure fraught with the danger that the concept becomes so broad that

it loses its distinctiveness, and a narrowing one threatening to distort and deny the phenomena it is supposed to explain. The concept of nature is fundamental for every major philosopher in this tradition. One is almost inclined to say, "Tell me how a thinker conceives of nature, and I can infer the rest of her philosophy." In the seventeenth century, we find the beginnings of revolutionary new ways of conceiving nature. This is the origin of modern natural science – the period of great advances in mathematics, astronomy, and physics – a time associated with Copernicus, Kepler, Descartes, and Galileo, which culminated with the great discoveries of Newton. These new scientific developments presented a great challenge to philosophers – the need to give a philosophical account of the new conception of nature that was emerging in science.

One of the great and most controversial philosophers of the seventeenth century was Spinoza. He was a descendant of the Jewish Marranos who fled Portugal for Amsterdam. Amsterdam, at the time, was one of the most liberal and cosmopolitan cities in Europe – one of the few places where Jews were allowed to practice their religion openly. Spinoza received a rigorous Jewish education, but at the age of twenty-four he was excommunicated – in the harshest and most vicious manner – from the closed Jewish community for his supposedly heretical views. No Jew was allowed to have contact with him or read any of his writings. Spinoza spent the rest of his life earning a living by grinding lenses, working on optics, and dedicating himself to his philosophy. Spinoza was the initiator of the "Radical Enlightenment," to use Jonathan Israel's expression (Israel 2001). He challenged any conception of a transcendent God represented by the Abrahamic religions. He became what Yirmiyahu Yovel calls the "Marrano of Reason" (Yovel 1989). During his lifetime – and long afterward – he was viciously attacked as an unrepentant atheist – although he consistently denied that he was an atheist. His magnum opus, *Ethics*, was published only posthumously. Spinoza was an extremely ambitious thinker with an absolute commitment to philosophy and rationality. He was committed to a version of the principle of sufficient reason according to which everything in the world can be explained rationally. From reading the *Ethics,* it becomes clear that, for Spinoza, God is identified with Nature and Substance. Nature itself can be completely rationally explained by appealing to the universal laws of nature. Spinoza is preeminently a philosopher of immanence – a "this-worldly" philosopher. He rejected the idea of an anthropomorphic transcendent God as superstition, as well as rejecting the appeal to final causes and human free will. He sought to give a completely naturalistic account of human emotions and morality.

With the exception of a few thinkers who engaged with Spinoza's ideas, his influence was marginalized during the century following his death. His ideas were rediscovered only at the end of the eighteenth century during the famous pantheist controversy that played a significant role in the renewal of the interest in Spinoza. What is so impressive about Spinoza is his systematic and rigorous development of a new understanding of nature. In his *Ethics* he adopted a version of Euclid's geometric method consisting of definitions, axioms, propositions, and logical proofs. The geometric method was not limited to mathematics. Rather, it was the method for developing a *grand metaphysical system* that explains nature in a completely determinate manner, offering logically compelling proofs. Although, as has been said, Descartes is frequently called the "father" of modern philosophy, Spinoza is the "father" and founder of modern naturalism, maintaining that everything in nature, including human beings, their emotions, and morality, can be explained by appealing to the universal and necessary natural laws. Initially, Spinoza's grand metaphysical mode of thinking appears completely alien to our contemporary ways of thinking. Virtually every major philosopher has criticized him, including Hume, Kant, and Hegel. Yet, as we will see, the specter of Spinoza hovers over a great deal of modern thought, including that of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.

At the same time as Spinoza elaborated his system of nature, another philosophical tradition – empiricism – was emerging in Great Britain, culminating with David Hume. Hume claims that most of what Spinoza wrote in his *Ethics* is metaphysical gibberish and ought to be committed to the flames. He rejects every major concept of Spinoza, including God, Substance, and Nature. Yet, we will see that, despite Hume's repudiation of Spinoza, there are common themes in their conceptions of naturalism and immanence. Hume's beginning point in his *Treatise* is not metaphysics but the epistemological doctrine that all perceptions consist of impressions and ideas. From this starting point, Hume develops an elegant and powerful model of the human mind and nature. Hume rejects the claims of rationalist thinkers like Spinoza that we can justify concepts such as causality by an appeal to reason. It is not reason that lies at the foundation of our empirical knowledge of the world of nature, but rather custom, habit, feeling, and sentiment. Reason *by itself* does not tell us *anything* about the natural world. There is a tension between skepticism and naturalism in Hume's thinking that is evident in his attempt to develop a science of human beings that would complement what Newton had achieved in natural philosophy (what we now call "natural science").

Hume's starting point gets him into trouble. Normally we think of a simple sensory impression such as an impression of a red patch as being *caused* by an actual red patch in the natural world (unless we are hallucinating). Hume, however, claims that *all* our perceptions arise from "unknown causes." Many empiricists before Hume, such as John Locke, presume it to be evident that objects and events in the "real" world cause our perceptions – especially impressions. But if all our perceptions consist exclusively of discrete impressions and ideas, as Hume suggests, then there is no way – it is *impossible* – to get beyond our impressions and ideas to see if they correspond to "real" natural objects and events. Hume's problem, however, is not how we *know* that there are objects and events in the "real" world that are *independent* of our impressions, but rather how and why we come to *believe* that there are such objects and events. This strain in Hume's thinking leads to his skepticism about an objective world independent of our perceptions. At the same time, Hume carries out his naturalistic explanation of human actions and beliefs. Hume is famous for his psychological account of causality and necessary connection. He presents strong arguments to show that we cannot appeal to reason to provide an account of causality. This is Hume's powerful negative conception of causality directed against all rationalist accounts of causality, including Spinoza's.

Immanuel Kant was deeply influenced by Hume's *negative* argument. In Kant's terminology, Hume demonstrated that the causal principle is not an *analytic* principle; it cannot be justified by an appeal to reason alone – by an appeal to the principle of contradiction. There is no logical contradiction in denying that every event must have a cause. According to Kant, Hume's great failure was that he failed to recognize that there are *synthetic a priori principles*. For Kant, the acknowledgment of such principles is *essential* for our understanding of both mathematics and natural science. (Of course, Hume and Humeans would challenge the idea that there are *any* synthetic *a priori* principles.) For all Hume's admiration of Newton, Kant argues, Hume fails to appreciate that the Newtonian conception of nature presupposes universal and necessary deterministic laws of nature.

In order to address the failures of Hume's account of causality, Kant carries out his famous Copernican Revolution. It is not that our ideas and concepts correspond to objects, Kant contends, but rather that our reason (*Verstand*) is the source of concepts (categories) and principles that specify the very conditions for the possibility of our experience of nature. I interpret Kant as confronting an existential crisis in his *Critique of Pure Reason.* Necessary universal laws govern nature. Human beings, insofar as they are natural creatures, are also governed by universal and necessary laws.

If human beings were *exclusively* natural creatures, then there would be no way to account for human freedom, human responsibility, morality, or rational faith. Thus, a large part of Kant's first *Critique* is dedicated to showing that human beings are not *merely* natural creatures; they are also *rational* beings. In his famous Second Analogy, Kant sets out to show that the "causality of nature" is compatible with the nonempirical "causality of freedom." The appeal to nature can never account for human reason and conceptual normativity because it is reason (both *Verstand* and *Vernunft*) that specifies the framework – the very *conditions* for the possibility of *objective nature.* Kant pays a heavy price for his attempt to reconcile freedom and natural necessity. It requires him to say that the *very same event* in the natural world can be explained by both natural causality and the causality of freedom. To see Kant's point, consider the example that I give in my chapter on Kant. Suppose I deliberately raise my hand in a classroom to get a teacher's attention. As an event in the natural world, it can be explained *exclusively* by an appeal to natural causes – that is, I can, in principle, give a *complete* naturalistic explanation of this event. But from a different perspective, we can also say that the very *same event* is the result of the causality of freedom. However, it is unclear precisely how the same event can be explained by *both* natural necessity and the nonempirical causality of freedom. Kant eventually came to realize that his mechanistic account of causality in the first *Critique* is paradoxical. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* he attempts to show how freedom and necessity can be reconciled by an appeal to *reflecting* judgment (which is sharply distinguished from *determining* judgment). He also realizes that he needs to enlarge his conception of nature to account for the biological phenomena of organic creatures. In this context, he introduces the concept of purpose (*Zweck*), specifically *Naturzweck*. Once again, we discover unresolved problems in Kant's thinking. *Zweck* is *not* a category of *Verstand* (understanding); it is *not* constitutive of nature. Rather, it is a regulative principle that we human beings employ to understand organic creatures. Yet, although not constitutive, the appeal to purpose is *essential* for describing and understanding biological phenomena. Does it make sense, then, to speak of *Zweck* as only a regulative and not a constitutive principle of nature?

Despite these and other perplexities, Kant's philosophy is a powerful one insofar as it has had a significant influence on twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophy. Many contemporary thinkers like John McDowell and Robert Brandom are convinced that Kant discovered the independence of conceptual normativity. They agree with Kant that conceptual normativity – the heart of discursive rationality – *cannot* be

explained by an appeal to nature. Kant has become a champion of those thinkers who are convinced that an appeal to nature cannot account for human rationality, because this rationality establishes the universal and necessary conditions for an *objective* concept of nature. To the extent that we accept the sharp dichotomy between nature and freedom, or nature and rationality, *all* naturalistic programs (including those of Spinoza and Hume) fail.[1] Kant's critical philosophy is based upon a set of (unstable) distinctions and dichotomies including sensibility and understanding, spontaneity and receptivity, *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, phenomena and noumena, appearance and thing in itself, nature and freedom, nature and rationality. Throughout his three *Critiques* Kant struggles to show how these oppositions (which he sometimes characterizes as heterogeneous) are related to each other.

During Kant's lifetime, many critics attacked these dichotomies – especially the dichotomy between nature and freedom, between appearance and thing in itself, and between nature and rationality. German idealists – Schelling, Fichte, and Hegel – sought to develop alternative accounts of the Kantian dichotomies. Hegel takes Kant's starting point seriously but seeks to show that the Kantian dichotomies are not fixed and rigid. They turn out to be changing moments within a *self-determining* dynamic whole. Developing his speculative identity thesis, Hegel seeks to show both the identity and nonidentity of the Kantian dichotomies. However, Hegel *apparently* leaves us with one great residual dichotomy – the dichotomy between *Geist* and Nature. Many interpreters of Hegel privilege *Geist* over Nature. *Geist* is alive; Nature is dead. As one Hegel commentator, Robert Pippin, claims, *Geist* "leaves nature behind" (Pippin 2002). I argue that this popular interpretation is mistaken. I offer a naturalistic interpretation of Hegel that shows how *Geist* emerges out of Nature. There is no sharp metaphysical or epistemological break between Nature and *Geist*; there is a continuity. When Nature is fully *actualized*, it becomes *Geist*. When *Geist* is fully *actualized*, it is embodied in Nature. Nature and *Geist* are *both* identical and nonidentical. I call those interpreters of Hegel who privilege *Geist* over Nature "Kantian Hegelians." Brandom is the leading Kantian Hegelian; he insists on a sharp distinction between sentience and sapience (Brandom 1994). He argues that discursive rationality *must* be clearly *demarcated* from natural phenomena. From his perspective, it is *conceptually impossible* to give a naturalistic account of human discursive rationality. An opposing tradition, and an opposing reading of Hegel, is the naturalism of John Dewey. Whereas Brandom insists on clear and rigorous *demarcation*, Dewey insists on *continuity*, including the continuity of nature and ration-

ality (what Dewey calls "intelligence"). Many contemporary debates today are the legacy of these different readings of Hegel.

II

Something happened in the mid-nineteenth century that I compare to a volcanic eruption. A volcano erupts when magma builds up to the point that the volcano explodes. Something like this happened with the three "masters of suspicion," as Paul Ricoeur (1970) characterizes Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. For all the differences between Spinoza, Hume, Kant, and Hegel, they were all committed to a *philosophical* approach to nature. In contrast, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are suspicious of philosophical conceptions of nature. In radically different ways, they argue that philosophy mystifies nature. They attack what had been the starting point of so much modern philosophy since Descartes – the appeal to consciousness. They are great destroyers, great demystifiers, and sharp critics of what they take to be false illusions. Their critiques are not merely negative; each of them seeks to elucidate a more adequate conception of nature. Marx, for example, argues that a proper starting point for understanding nature is human activity – human labor. In his writings of the 1840s he critiques alienated labor that is rooted in the historical formation of early capitalism with its institutionalization of wage labor and profit. He develops a new, *transactional* way of understanding the relationship between human beings and nature. Workers are part of nature, and they use nature for production. Capitalists exploit nature for the purpose of profit. Strictly speaking, it is misleading to speak of the human *and* nature; it is more perspicuous to speak of the human-in-nature. Marx is critical of the idea of *nature in itself*. The nature that we encounter is always within a *historical* formation. Some interpreters of Marx, like Louis Althusser (2005), distinguish "two Marxs" – the "early" humanistic Marx and the presumably more "mature" scientific Marx. Some interpreters then defend the humanistic Marx, while others argue that there was an epistemological break that took place in 1845, when Marx presumably abandons his humanism and his early conception of nature. I argue that this demarcation between the "two Marxs" is mistaken. There is certainly development and refinement throughout Marx's career, but by analyzing key passages from the *Grundrisse* and *Das Kapital*, I demonstrate the continuity of Marx's understanding of nature.

Nietzsche is a ruthless critic of Christianity, morality, and the distorting prejudices of philosophy. He disdains straightforward linear arguments. He celebrates contradictory perspectives as the mark of high culture. He experiments with different styles, aphorisms, poems, and imaginative fictions. Recently, there has been a trend among Anglo-American interpreters of Nietzsche to develop a naturalistic interpretation of his thought. I examine what is illuminating and restrictive about these divergent naturalistic readings of Nietzsche. I then turn to what Nietzsche *actually says* about nature – his attempt to demystify and purify nature, to get rid of "God's shadows" that have contaminated nature for the past two thousand years. Nietzsche's nature is chaotic and shaped by instincts and *contradictory* unconscious drives. Nietzsche warns about a type of nihilism that is turning a human into a bland domestic animal – what he calls the "last man." He also warns against turning aggressive instincts against oneself and fostering *ressentiment* and self-hatred. A joyous *life-affirming* way of life is a possibility for a few exceptional and gifted individuals. They are the "Yes-sayers" who affirm the significance of human suffering and tragedy. They are also the ones who purify nature through their way of thinking, feeling, and living.

In many ways, Freud is closer to Nietzsche than to Marx, especially with respect to the role he assigns to the unconscious and the primary drives (sexual and aggressive) that are rooted in the unconscious. In his earliest writings, Freud accepts the positivist credo advocated by his Viennese and German scientific colleagues – the conviction that quantitative natural science *alone* can tell us what nature is. In his 1895 "Project for a Scientific Psychology" he seeks to develop an understanding of human nature based on the constancy principle that he appropriates from physics. Already in the "Project" it becomes increasingly evident that Freud's insights into psychic reality – the key for understanding human nature – exceed his quantitative framework. Primary drives are at once somatic (biological) and psychic. Freud frequently refers to drive as a *borderline* concept. From the time of the "Project" (which he abandoned) to the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, Freud made a number of discoveries that led to the development of psychoanalysis, which emphasizes the significance of infantile sexuality in shaping who we become. Repressed sexual drives are the source of neurotic symptoms. Patients develop strong *resistance* to acknowledging this repressed material. The task of the psychoanalyst is to help the analysand to come to recognize what she has repressed.

Freud developed the method of "free association" (which is not really "free") in order to get his patients to reveal hidden associations that

enable the psychoanalyst to discover what is being repressed and resisted. Transference (as well as counter-transference) between the analysand and the psychoanalyst also turns out to be important in order to discover what the patient is repressing. Freud argues that dreams, as well as slips of the tongue, are *meaningful*. The task of the analyst is to discover the *secret* meaning of dreams and the functioning of dreamwork – the construction, distortion, and condensation of the manifest and latent content of dreams. Freud's great philosophical battle was with those thinkers who maintain that *all* mental activity is *conscious*. In Freud's view, they fail to recognize the powerful role of unconscious psychic activity. Freud's claims about the unconscious are strikingly original. The unconscious is a system – an agency – that is atemporal and knows no negation. Contradictory primal drives are rooted in the unconscious.

Freud developed his views about human nature (not just the nature of "sick souls") from his clinical observations by proposing different models to explain what he was encountering. He developed two different topographical models. The first one distinguishes the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious. The major distinction is between the conscious/preconscious and the unconscious that is never *fully* accessible to consciousness. When Freud discovered problems with this model, especially concerning the role of the unconscious, he proposed a second topographical model of the id, ego, and superego. From the 1890s until the 1920s, Freud was primarily concerned with *individual* psychic reality. But beginning in the 1920s, he expanded his speculations to include group behavior, as well as the way in which civilization is a source of frustration, suffering, and unhappiness (despite its technical and cultural achievements). In his notorious and controversial *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), he proposes an original death principle (*Thanatos*) that is an *internal drive* of organisms to return to what is inorganic. The death drive, when directed *outwards*, is the primary source of human aggressiveness and destruction. Many of Freud's closest associates rejected the hypothesis of an independent death drive. Nevertheless, Freud insisted upon it until the end of his life. *Thanatos* is opposed by *Eros*, which encompasses what Freud had previously characterized as sexuality; it is the drive toward *unification*. In Freud's late speculative theory of instincts, there is a perpetual *battle* between *Thanatos* and *Eros*. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Freud argues that civilization is the primary source of human suffering and unhappiness. There is no escape from civilization to some idealized innocent state of being. The discontents of civilization are inevitable and intractable. Frequently, Freud's views of human nature are judged pessimistic. Against such views, I argue

that Freud develops a *realistic* perspective; he faces up honestly to the limitations of human nature and seeks to ameliorate (not eliminate) human suffering and misery. We need to give up the illusion and fantasy of complete happiness – it is not achievable. Rather, we should live in a manner wherein we seek to negotiate the avoidance of human suffering and misery with the episodic satisfaction of our primary instinctual drives. There is, however, a major difference between Nietzsche and Freud. Freud is skeptical about Nietzsche's joyful affirmation of life – of the human as a "Yes-sayer." From Freud's perspective, this is an unrealistic fantasy. Nietzsche, in turn, might accuse Freud's compromise between living a life that seeks to avoid suffering and misery as a "celebration" of the "last man."

Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are three destroyers of illusions. Each thinker in a different way seeks to expose how the philosophy of nature distorts nature. Each seeks to develop a *new* way of understanding nature, especially human nature, which emphasizes the *transactional* character of the *human-in-nature*. In different ways, all three belong to the tradition of Spinoza's philosophy of immanence. Each rejects any appeal to what is transcendent. They are "this-worldly" thinkers; they each develop distinctive critiques of religion and the ways in which it distorts the nature of our nature. Each one offers a deep understanding of nature based on a relentless critique – even when it reveals intractable and disturbing facts about human beings.

III

In parts I and II above, I have outlined some of the key points that I develop in this book. In each chapter, I pay close attention to the textual support through which I seek to "flesh out" and texture my key claims. I explicate how each thinker – Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud – conceives of nature from their own perspective, the reasons that lead them to their distinctive views, and the significance of their contributions to our understanding of nature. There are manifest contradictions and incompatibilities among these thinkers. To take one central example – namely the account of causality, which is crucial for Spinoza's, Hume's, and Kant's analysis of nature – there is no easy way to reconcile Spinoza's *logical* understanding of causality with Hume's *psychological* conception of causality and Kant's *critical* account of causality. But we can engage in a creative dialogue in which we bring out the strengths and weaknesses of

their views. Throughout, I indicate unsuspected affinities (as well as differences) among these thinkers.

I have *three* interrelated purposes in writing this book. In the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there has been a revival of interest in naturalism and nature. Many contemporary thinkers identify themselves as naturalists. However, when we examine this literature closely, there is simply no consensus about the meaning of nature, natural science, or naturalism. In my previous monograph (Bernstein 2020), I sought to articulate and defend a pragmatic naturalism, which originated with Dewey. I tried to show how some of the best and most sophisticated recent reflections on nature and naturalism enrich and add analytic subtlety to Dewey's legacy. In working on this material, I also discovered that many contemporary thinkers are ignorant of the rich modern tradition of nature, naturalism, and critiques of naturalism. Consequently, I wanted to dig deeper and clarify the variety and vicissitudes of nature in modern thought – from Spinoza to Freud.

A second purpose, closely related with the first one, has been to correct the myths, clichés, and distortions regarding the ways in which past thinkers conceived of nature, and especially the reasons they offered to justify their views. To give one current example, many contemporary thinkers claim that "traditional" philosophers made a sharp distinction between nature and culture – a distinction that is no longer viable. Ironically, *none* of the thinkers I consider introduces or presupposes such a simplistic distinction between nature and culture.

To explain my third, and major, purpose, I need to clarify my own *historical* approach to nature. Some of the thinkers I examine, such as Spinoza and Kant, are committed to the idea that philosophy can offer a conception of nature that stands for all time. I reject such an *ahistorical* view. I accept Hegel's dictum that philosophy is its *own time* comprehended in thoughts. This means that the task of understanding nature must meet new challenges and developments; this is an open task that must be performed over and over again. Many of these new challenges arise from the emergence of new scientific disciplines, such as neuroscience, cognitive science, and ecology, as well as from the changing understanding of the nature of science itself. However, taking on this task also means taking account of the urgent practical challenges that emerge in our time. It is clear that our major practical problems today are climate change, the destruction of the earth by fossil fuels, and the warming of the oceans. Every few months, there are new scientific reports warning about the dire consequences that we will face if we do not *dramatically* try to meet these challenges. In light of

recent natural disasters – horrific droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes, intense storms, and widespread wildfires – it is becoming clear that the catastrophe is happening *now*. It is not surprising that today there is so much dystopian literature, film, and media. We still resist the fact that unless human beings *radically* change their behavior and practices *now*, the most likely outcome will be the self-destruction of the human species.

There is *actually* a fourth major purpose of the book that is implicit in the first three purposes. Nature is not a marginal or peripheral concept in the thinkers I consider: it is absolutely *central* for them. I argue that their distinctive concepts of nature shape every aspect of their thinking. It is a key for grasping their overall intellectual orientations toward human beings and the world.

There is also a serious intellectual problem with the way in which we comprehend nature today. While there is a good deal of new and creative thinking about nature, there is also a desperate grouping of new concepts. Coming up with new ways of understanding nature that take account of recent practical and theoretical challenges is our *major* task today. In order to deal with these issues, it is necessary to take into consideration a full account of the insights and challenges of past thinkers. In this sense, my book is a *prolegomenon* – an introduction – to rethinking humanity and nature today. From Kant we learn that a prolegomenon is at once a warning and a guide. It warns us about the limitations of knowledge, illusions, and dead ends, but it also serves as a guide to what we can know and comprehend. As I hope to show, the tradition from Spinoza to Freud offers extremely rich resources for the task of developing an adequate understanding of nature *for our time*, as well as of the challenges that we must confront.

Part I

The Philosophy of Nature

1

Spinoza: Founder of Modern Naturalism

Es Muss Sein

I

There has never been a philosopher like Spinoza – a philosopher so viciously condemned and so ecstatically praised. Spinoza, born in Amsterdam on November 14, 1632, was descended from a Jewish Marrano family that fled Portugal at the end of the sixteenth century. Amsterdam at the time was a wealthy tolerant city where the Jews were allowed to practice their religion. The young Spinoza received a rigorous Jewish education in the relatively closed Jewish community, but on July 27, 1656, when he was not yet twenty-four, he was banned – in the harshest manner – from the Jewish community for his "evil opinions" and his "horrible heresies." The Ruling Council of the Amsterdam Jewish community banished him from "the nation of Israel" and proclaimed the following *herem* (ban) on him:

> "By the degree of the Angels and the word of the Saints we ban, cut off, curse and anathemize Baruch de Espinoza . . . with all the curses written in the Torah [*Ley*]: Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night, cursed in his lying down and cursed in his waking up, cursed in his going forth and cursed in his coming in; and may the L[ord] not want his pardon, and may the L[ord]'s wrath and zeal burn upon him . . . and ye that did cleave into the L[ord] your G[od] are all alive today."

> We warn that none may contact him orally or in writing, nor do him any favor, nor stay under the same roof with him, nor read any paper he made or wrote.[1]

During his lifetime, especially after he published his *Theological-Political Treatise* in 1670, Spinoza was also severely attacked by Christians – both Protestants (especially Dutch Calvinists) and Catholics – for his heretical views. The *Theological-Political Treatise* was condemned as a book "full of abominations," a book "forged in hell," written by the devil himself.[2]

Spinoza was accused of being an atheist, although he consistently denied this. There is a good reason why some condemned – and others praised – Spinoza for his alleged atheism. If we think of theism as the doctrine asserting the existence of a God that transcends this world, a God who created the world, a God who performs miracles, and a God who possesses such anthropomorphic traits as "wrath" and "jealousy," then there is no ambiguity, for Spinoza rejected such a conception of God. He argued that such a conception is self-contradictory and incoherent. Spinoza was an originator of a higher biblical criticism that interpreted the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) not as the word of God or the source of "sacred truths," but as a human document dealing with moral and political issues. He sought to demystify the Bible.[3]

Spinoza was the key figure in what Jonathan Israel (2001) calls the "Radical Enlightenment." We normally associate the Enlightenment with eighteenth-century French, English, or German thinkers linked and marked by national concerns. But Israel argues that "Spinoza and Spinozism were in fact the intellectual backbone of the European Radical Enlightenment everywhere, not only in the Netherlands, Germany, France, Italy, and Scandinavia but also Britain and Ireland" (Israel 2001: p. vi). This Spinozist "Radical Enlightenment"

> not only attacked and severed the roots of traditional European culture in the sacred, magic, kingship, and hierarchy, secularizing all institutions and ideas, but (intellectually and to a degree in practice) effectively demolished all legitimation of monarchy, aristocracy, woman's subordination to man, ecclesiastical authority, and slavery, replacing these with the principles of universality, equality, and democracy. (Israel 2001: p. vi)

Unlike thinkers of the "moderate Enlightenment," who seek in various ways to reconcile faith in a transcendent God with the demands of reason, Spinoza was uncompromising. He rejected a religious faith in a transcendent God as nothing more than an unwarranted prejudice, a superstition.

We will see that Spinoza's understanding of Nature, which he identifies with God and Substance, is the key to his radical views.[4]

Scholars have frequently asked how such a radical thinker emerged in the seventeenth century – a thinker who challenged the foundations of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Yovel (1989) provides one of the most illuminating analyses of this curious historical phenomenon. He characterizes Spinoza as the "Marrano of Reason." The Marranos were Jews living in Spain and Portugal in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries who were forced to convert to Christianity. The Jewish Marranos – sometimes called "New Christians" – were publicly compelled to profess Christian beliefs and perform Christian rituals, while secretly and privately keeping their allegiance to the Torah and the laws of Moses. Many of them were persecuted by the Inquisition and burned at the stake in rituals known as "acts of faith" (*autos-de-fê*). Spinoza belonged to those fortunate Marranos who escaped from Portugal and openly practiced their Jewish faith. Yovel describes the main patterns of the Marrano experience that he discerns in Spinoza:

> (1) heterodoxy and the transcendence of revealed religion; (2) a skill for equivocation and dual language; (3) a dual life – inner and external; (4) a dual career with a break between; (5) toleration versus the Inquisition; (6) a zeal for salvation, to be gained by alternative ways to that of tradition; and – coupled with it – this-worldliness, secularism, and the denial of transcendence. All of these Marrano features can be traced in Spinoza, even if in a somewhat different guise. They are reflected not only in his thought but even more in his life or existential case. (Yovel 1989: 28)[5]

Spinoza affirmed that it is reason, and reason *alone*, that is the source of all truth. He had supreme confidence that philosophy as a discipline could discover and logically prove this truth. Extraordinarily ambitious in his claims, Spinoza was confident that he had discovered *the* truth. In one of his letters, he wrote: "I do not presume that I have found the best philosophy, but I know that what I understand is the true one" (Spinoza 1995: 342).[6] For Spinoza, to explain means to show that one true proposition is the logically necessary consequence of another proposition. As Stuart Hampshire notes,

> explanation essentially involves exhibiting necessary connexions, and 'necessary connexion' in this context means a strictly logical connexion to be discovered by logical analysis of the ideas involved. The idea of scientific knowledge is here purely deductive and mathematical; Euclid's geometry

> provides the standard example of genuine explanation, in that Euclid is concerned only with the purely logical dependence of the possession of one property or properties on the possession of others. (Hampshire 1951: 29)

Spinoza's rationalism is audacious, because his claims about strictly necessary logical connections are not restricted to the study of mathematics and logic but are applicable to the study and knowledge of *all* of Nature, including the nature of human beings. The spirit of Spinoza's approach to *all* issues is exemplified by what he says in the concluding paragraph to the Preface to Part III of the *Ethics*:

> The Affects, therefore, of hate, anger, envy, etc., considered in themselves follow from the same necessity and force of nature as the other singular things. And therefore they acknowledge certain causes, through which they are understood, and have certain properties, as worthy of our knowledge as the properties of any other thing, by the mere contemplation of which we are pleased. Therefore, I shall treat the nature and powers of the Affects, and the power of the Mind over them, by the same Method by which, in the preceding parts, I treated God and the Mind, and I shall consider human actions and appetites as if it were a Question of lines, planes, and bodies. (III Preface)[7]

One of the reasons why Spinoza's philosophy can seem so remote from us today is because there is no acknowledgment of the fallibility of his philosophical claims and no sense of fallibility in acquiring the *true* knowledge of Nature (and God). He explicitly denies that in Nature there is anything contingent: "In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way" (IP29).[8] Like his predecessor Descartes, Spinoza was impressed by the development of the sciences that appeal to the absolute certainty and the logical necessity of mathematics – the type of self-evident certainty and necessity exhibited by Euclid's *Elements*.[9] He was committed to the doctrine that everything in the universe (in Nature) is intelligible – everything can be rationally explained by logical deduction from axioms and adequate definitions. Although he did not use the Leibnizian expression the "principle of sufficient reason," he was committed to this principle in an even more rigorous manner than Leibniz.[10] For Spinoza, to conceive is to make intelligible, and he expresses this conviction in one of his first axioms: "What cannot be conceived through another, must be conceived through itself" (IA2). He affirms: "For each thing there must be assigned a cause, *or* reason, as much for its existence