

Review: Tunguska, Or the End of Nature: A Philosophical Dialogue
By Michael Hampe; Translated by Michael Winkler

Reviewed by Ryder W. Miller
New York, NY, USA

Hampe, Michael. *Tunguska, Or the End of Nature: A Philosophical Dialogue*. Translated by Michael Winkler. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 2015. 221 pp., illus. ISBN: 9780226123127. Cloth; alkaline paper. Notes: Translation of the 2011 German edition.

Tunguska, Or the End of Nature: A Philosophical Dialogue explores the concept and definition of Nature again, this time in the context of understanding an astronomical event, the meteor impact that occurred in Tunguska, Siberia, on June 30, 1908. It is widely believed that an asteroid hit the earth at that time, and there are accounts of a disastrous fire that took place there, but as argued here, no meteor was found. There is some conjecture that it was a different type of event. The original text was written by Michael Hampe, a professor of philosophy at ETH Zurich, Switzerland, and translated by Michael Winkler, a professor emeritus in German studies at Rice University.

The book has many sections including fantastical dialogues concerning the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water, and other things. The dialogues begin with introductions about life and the four elements. Four thinkers in fictional form are assembled to follow and discuss the relevance of Tunguska, including a physicist based on Gunter Hasinger and Steven Weinberg, a philosopher based on Paul Feyerabend, a biologist based on Adolf Portman, and a mathematician based on Alfred North Whitehead. There is also an essay included: "Shared Aspects of Naturalness, An Essay in Natural Philosophy." The book finishes with an epilogue which reminds the reader what the arguments have shown.

The author argues that our idea of Nature and our relationship with "the other" has now ended. It is hard to intellectualize what Nature is with all the recent arguments, some of which are included in the book. We may not be able to depend upon our intuitive sense for this either. This book does a good job getting us to think about this as an argument. These are arguments from thinkers, however, who may be unfamiliar to most environmentalists might. Others here in America have famously argued that Nature as an idea is dead or has met its end. The texts are usually understandable, but at times they become challenging, e.g. trying to agree upon a definition of Nature. Alfred North Whitehead wrote that "nature is the universe" and argues so here. This makes sense in the context of the larger universe that comes to our door step in Tunguska. The biologist character in the book argues that Nature exists in contrast to culture and technology. This argument about Nature as an Other is made successfully, but the author is not convinced.

There could have been also some endangered species in the fantastical conversation who would be angry that human beings have ruined their abodes and would have agreed with the biologist. It is not clear what the fate of endangered species and wild places will be with this new "understanding." One can argue that human beings have evolved out of the wilderness or Nature, but the assembled, like much of the general public are not satisfied with this. Sadly, not noticeable here, like in many of these arguments, is the

acknowledgement that the word “Nature” has a number of meanings including: everything, the biological and geological other, and the properties of things and more.

The book will interest green thinkers, intellectuals, and those interested in debate about Nature and wilderness. The book does seem to give one a sense of those who are arguing that the concept of Nature is dead. As such, it might prepare some to argue successfully in defense of the protection of threatened and endangered species. Philosophers are likely to be happy the book is in English. One can find references to the writings of the representational characters in the bibliography. Adolf Portman is likely to be most helpful for the historical argument of what environmentalism was/is about. Astronomers are likely to better like Alfred North Whitehead.

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