

Comments on *Hera, or Empathy*
by
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Hera returns to themes that William Leiss first explored in *Domination of Nature* (first published in 1972). One interesting way in which it does so is with regard to the notion of the intrinsic worth of all living beings. (I don't think that he would say just 'beings,' but I may be wrong.) In lectures, several times over the last few decades, he has made the point that whether it was right or wrong for humans to control nature, we now have the responsibility to do so as wisely as possible since we now have that power. It seemed to me at the time that this was a rejection of the viability of the question of intrinsic worth. I'm not sure if it was meant in that way, but in *Hera* Leiss clearly wants to assert such a position. The problem is, of course, that it's hard to see how a conception of the intrinsic worth of all beings could be introduced effectively into a policy discourse such that it might change the direction of contemporary technology. It is the utopian framework of *Hera* that lets him raise the issue.

The book reads very well. It makes a contribution to the genre of utopian fiction extending back to Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* in which the potential for modern science and technology to contribute to the well-being of humans was debated publicly. Only rarely, mainly with the scientific documents, did it drag. Indeed, I find myself wanting to hear how it turns out in the promised next two volumes.

One of the questions this volume raises is the stark opposition between science and religion that structures most of the dialogues and action. It can be established historically that the Christian doctrine of nature was an essential element in the formation of modern science, mainly through the idea of the disenchantment of nature. Also, that the defence of human natural reason is not at all foreign to the Judeo-Christian tradition. At several points, however, the dialogues in *Hera* indicate the sense in which they share key assumptions. I believe that the main point in the book is that they both are based on a conception of human identity as outside the object of study, that is, the createdness of humans by God and the scientific intelligence assumed to be outside the nature that it comprehends. This connection is made centrally in the context of the claim that germ-line innovation in the genetic structure of humans proves that this externality is no longer sustainable. I gather from the structure of the three volumes sketched at the back that this will lay the way for a Hegelian-inspired reconciliation of science and religion based upon the point at which they share an assumption that is no longer viable. I am keen to see how this will be worked out.

Despite this, it still seems to me that the science-religion opposition is rather over-played in the *Hera* story. A central contention is that humans mainly hold to both and feel no need to address the contradiction, which is certainly true, but on this ground, and also the one that there is an inner conceptual relation unperceived by most adherents, I would think that the possibility of a show-down between science and religion in the near future is unlikely, or even that it will be the main issue. It would seem to me that the ground for a 'reconciliation' (though perhaps more in the 'demonic' sense of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* than in the Hegelian sense) is already laid, in the sense that Christian (and other) fundamentalists seem quite willing to agree about the necessity for the continued domination of nature.

In other words, it seems to be a local controversy. The larger issue is the shared assumption. Perhaps this is where the narrative is going by suggesting an *Aufhebung* in the coming volumes. In that sense, perhaps one of the key educational themes of the first volume is to show that both scientists and believers must overcome the sense of their separation. As I said, I think that this is already well underway—at least in practice—and that the contest has moved on. I guess that I'm raising an issue here that only the whole story could resolve, but, from the viewpoint of the first volume, and the final message about the shared assumption, the opposition seems to dominate the book too much.

There are many other minor themes that are well treated. For example, I enjoyed in the references to music (which even include suggestions for the best recordings). Also, the discussions of migraine and depression were very acute. Leiss seems to flirt with the interesting idea that migraine and depression are somehow inherently connected to intense intellectual work. However, I am skeptical that one can pull oneself out of depression, as the story suggests.

Hera is a major contribution to the debate concerning the relation between humanity and nature which is bound to become a reference point for both the near and far future. Not only is it grounded in a philosophical vision, that goes back to *Domination of Nature* and has been extended in decades of original research by Leiss, but, due to its presentation in a lively work of utopian fiction, is very accessible to the reader without philosophical training.