

# Hans-Jörg Rheinberger

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## On Stage

### A Contract with Nature

#### Abstract

This article reflects on Michael Serres' philosophical insights in *Le Contrat Naturel* (1990), emphasizing the urgency of redefining humanity's relationship with the Earth. Serres proposes a symbiotic alliance between the knowledge of natural sciences and prudent judgment, advocating for a profound shift in our interaction with the planet. The article delves into Serres' conceptualization of the five elements—earth, air, fire, water, and the universe of the living—while scrutinizing the role of sciences in fostering a harmonious coexistence with nature. It also examines Serres' critique of contemporary philosophy and social sciences, highlighting the unique position of natural sciences in acknowledging the material realities of the world. The interpretation of the two included images draws our attention to the consequences of neglecting the interconnectedness of humanity and nature. The author contends that scientists, as stewards of the Earth, must engage in a transformative process to ensure the sustainability of the planet for future generations.

**Keywords:** Michel Serres, Natural Contract, Anthropocene, Symbiosis, World-Objects, Science, Nature-Culture Divide

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In the summer of 2019, the French mariner, philosopher and historian of science Michel Serres passed away. He was one of the greatest thinkers and humanists of our days. In my contribution to this debate about the Anthropocene, I will focus on Serres' book *The Natural Contract*. It was published more than thirty years ago, but it has lost nothing of its urgency – and of its literary beauty, if I may add. On the contrary, Serres was a pioneer of the Anthropocene even before the term had come into use for our age about 20 years ago. What follows is a close reading of a few passages from this book documenting Serres' engagement with what we may call the five elements out there in the world: earth, air, fire, water, and the universe of the living. I will pay particular attention to the role attributed by him to the sciences in what he saw as the unavoidability of making peace with our planet Earth – for the sake of our own survival. In order to cope with this actual, dramatically increasing challenge, thus Serres, a new alliance is urgently needed between two types of reason: the reason behind what he called 'faithful knowledge,' that is, the knowledge of the natural sciences about the material world, and the reason behind 'prudent judgment' (Serres 1995, 93), thus, between 'pure reason' and 'practical reason' according to the classical dichotomy of Kant's Critiques (Kant 1996; Kant 2002).

*The Natural Contract* was published in the spring of 1990 in Paris and aroused a considerable storm of theoretical outrage. The purported scandal: How could a rational being dare to ascribe to nature the character of a contractual subject? Slightly less than ten years later, upon the invitation by the French National Library to look back on the publication of his book, Serres re-visited its underlying rationale. Here, he formulated it succinctly as follows: 'The subject becomes object. We become victims of our victories, the passivity of our activities, medical objects of our actions as subjects. And the global object becomes the subject, for it reacts to our actions'<sup>1</sup> (Serres 2000, 17).

How right he was to call us 'medical objects' back then, we were actually experiencing with the Corona pandemic. In a nutshell, Serres was claiming that humankind must abandon its parasitic relation to nature and convert it to a symbiotic relation. 'Rights of symbiosis', we read in *The Natural Contract*, 'are defined by reciprocity: however much nature gives man, man must give that much back to nature, now a legal subject' (Serres 1995, 38). But, he asks, thus anticipating a possible objection: 'What language do the things of the

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger.

Source: alamy.com



Fig. 1. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes: Duelo a garrotazos (1820). Prado, Madrid.

world speak, that we might come to an understanding with them, contractually?' and promptly answers in return: 'In fact, the Earth speaks to us in terms of forces, bonds, and interactions, and that's enough to make a contract' (Serres 1995, 39).

This is the point at which we can have a closer look at the argumentative texture of Michel Serres' book. He does not speak as a scientist here, he speaks and tells stories as a very specific kind of philosopher, one who sees it as philosophy's task 'to anticipate the future'<sup>2</sup> (Serres 2000, 22), as he puts it. No owl of Minerva thus rising at dusk, after the fact, that has haunted philosophical knowledge since the days of Hegel with its 'grey in grey' (Hegel 1991, 23). Serres is a thinker of the Anthropocene avant la lettre. It is worth looking at his reasoning in more detail.

Michel Serres finds drastic images for the current situation of the planet. His book begins with the forceful portrayal of a *pintura negra* by the Spanish painter Francisco de Goya (Fig. 1). Two youngsters are fighting with batons in a dune-like landscape. Each of them tries to hit the other with his rod. Forgetting everything around them, they do not realize that they are sinking deeper into the sand with each blow. The ground on which they are standing is going to engulf them both, irrespective of the outcome of their battle. They have lost

<sup>2</sup> Translated by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger.

sight, that is, of the material support that sustains them, the third party that mediates their relationship, their social interaction. This is how Serres transposes the fight: 'Take away the world around the battles, keep only conflicts or debates, thick with humanity and purified of things, and you obtain stage theater, most of our narratives and philosophies, history, and all of social science: the interesting spectacle they call cultural. Does anyone ever say where the master and slave fight it out? Our culture abhors the world' (Serres 1995, 3). Then he adds asking: 'Aren't we forgetting the world of things themselves, the sand, the water, the mud, the reeds of the marsh?' (Serres 1995, 2), and he concludes: 'We have lost the world. We've transformed things into fetishes or commodities, the stakes of our stratagems; and our a-cosmic philosophies, for almost half a century now, have been holding forth only on language or politics, writing or logic' (Serres 1995, 29).

As far as the discourses of contemporary philosophy are concerned, Serres' somber diagnosis is that 'Nature is reduced to human nature, which is reduced to either history or reason. The world has disappeared' (Serres 1995, 35) from their view. Serres' merciless bashing of philosophy and the social sciences, however, comes to a halt in the face of knowledge produced by the sciences of nature. He does of course not claim at all that the natural sciences were not socially constituted as well, and that they would not be tainted by history and contemporary theorizing, quite on the contrary. But in one decisive aspect, he considers, they differ: They simply cannot ignore the recalcitrance of their objects as easily as the humanities obviously can.

Nevertheless, the sciences play, aside from the peculiar constitution of their rationality, at the level of practice, of physical intervention, an inextricably double role in that 'world drama' of our times which is the subject of Serres' book. On the one hand, it is to the technical reifications of the sciences that we owe those 'world-objects,' that is, those 'artifacts that have at least one global-scale dimension (time, space, speed, or energy)' (Serres 1995, 15), such as: 'A satellite regarding speed, an atomic bomb for its energy, the internet with respect to space, atomic waste for time [...] these are four examples of world-objects' (Serres 2010, 12). These are the objects that stand in for the global effects of our actions on the planet and its atmosphere, the big issue of the Anthropocene. For Serres, the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the turning point at which the new era definitely began. By these bombs, he states, 'my

generation learned, as the first generation in history, that mankind as a whole faced the risk of extinction<sup>3</sup> (Serres 2010, 10).

On the other hand, of the three social powers that today, according to Serres, are the big players and dominate our affairs as well as our view on the world – administration, journalism, and science – the sciences are the only power that is definitely oriented toward the future: ‘Continuity belongs to administrators, the day-by-day to the media, and to science belong the only plans for the future we have left’ (Serres, 1995, 30). It remains thus as the main task for and is incumbent on the sciences to care about ‘the greatest object of scientific knowledge and practice, the Planet Earth, this new nature’ (Serres 1995, 30). And although today all three of the powerful subcultures mentioned (Serres 1995, 31), including the sciences, are driven more or less by short-term concerns, it is the sciences that appear to be best qualified to induce that ‘harrowing revision of today’s culture’ that will be necessary to keep the planet habitable. ‘Today’, Serres sums up, ‘our collectivity can equally well die of the productions of reason or safeguard itself through them’ (Serres 1995, 93).

The cover of the original edition with François Bourin of *Le Contrat naturel* nicely captures this double-sidedness (Fig. 2). It shows an oversized book whose pages are kept open by a dwarfed planet. On the one hand, the sciences and their technological output tend to devour the earth; on the other hand, it is the planet that keeps the pages of the book of science open.

In a late conversation with Michel Serres, Stéphanie Posthumus has observed that the figures, which give *The Natural Contract* – as well as *Biogée* (Serres 2010), his neologism for the ensemble of the earth and its living beings, in particular — their narrative imprint are the peasant, the mariner, and the wanderer. These personae are to be understood,



Fig. 2. Cover of the original François Bourin edition of Michel Serres' *Le Contrat naturel*, François Bourin, Paris 1990

<sup>3</sup> Translated by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger.

not in and by their traditional ways of living, and with that, nostalgia, but in and by the attitudes toward the worlds they represent, and that have tended to be forgotten over the course of time: 'The peasant lives with all the other living beings around him under one roof and believes in a soul of things and of the world. The mariner obeys an ethics of governance in his handling of wind and water that is shaped by precaution and by prudence. The wanderer finally is the model of an aleatoric and creative choice of moving forward. She does not follow one method in the sense of the one right path, irrespective of the places that she traverses. She respects the particular conditions of the real world she encounters'<sup>4</sup> (Posthumus 2018, 53).

It is these attitudes toward the world that Michel Serres, under the particular conditions of the present, calls for re-appropriating with his writings from the 1990s onward. These figures are by no means meant as a step back to the good old times; rather, Serres invites us to reconsider the relations that humankind – including all the scientific and technical sophistication it has today at its command –, will have to re-establish with the planet, if future generations are to retain the option to live in a livable environment. In order to grant it, we are in need of sciences that are able to consider, understand and manage complex relations, including the contingencies and singularities that arise from them. Serres was convinced that the sciences of the earth and of life must pursue the path on which they have launched to perforate the nature-culture divide, pleading for what Gaston Bachelard already announced with his sketch of a non-Cartesian scientific spirit (Bachelard, 1984), and what Isabelle Stengers and Ilya Prigogine called, a decade before Serres' *Contract*, *La Nouvelle alliance* (Prigogine and Stengers 1984).

The simple message to be derived from all this is that our planetary responsibility as scientists and epistemologists consists in promoting this transition on all possible levels and with all imaginable means. Thus, the most important of all things is: We have to become better scientists.

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4 Translated by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger.

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