**Natura and the Senses in Pliny’s *Natural History* [[1]](#footnote-1)**

CAMWS 2018 Albuquerque, NM

Eleni Hall Manolaraki University of South Florida

emanolar@usf.edu

**A. Preliminaries: The Divinity of *Natura* in Pliny**

**A1.** The world and this—whatever other name men have chosen to designate the sky whose vaulted roof encircles the universe, is fitly believed to be a deity (*numen esse credi par est*): eternal, immeasurable, a being that was never born and will never perish…it is sacred, eternal, immeasurable, wholly within the whole, rather itself the whole, finite and resembling the infinite, certain of all things and resembling the uncertain, holding in its embrace all things that are without and within, at once the work ofnature and nature herself (*rerum naturae opus et rerum ipsa natura*) [Pliny, *NH* 2.1-2]

**A2**. In these matters what other explanation could any mortal adduce but that they are caused by the deity of naturewhich is diffused throughout the universe, repeatedly and variously bursting out (*diffusae per omne naturae subinde aliter atque aliter numen erumpens*)? [Pliny, *NH* 2.208]

(see summary in Beagon, M. 1992. *Roman Nature: the Thought of Pliny the Elder*, pp. 26-54)

**B. Embodying the Sacred I: Insectile Senses**

**B1.** Nowhere else is nature’s craftsmanship of things more spectacular: for in large bodies or certainly in the larger ones the process of manufacture was facilitated by the yielding nature of the material; but in these minute nothings what method, what power, what labyrinthine perfection is displayed! Where did nature place all the senses in the mosquito?—and other smaller creatures can be mentioned,—but where on it did she place sight? Where did she attach taste? Where did she insert smell? And where did she implant that belligerent and comparatively booming voice? (*nusquam alibi spectatiore naturae rerum artificio. in magnis siquidem corporibus aut certe maioribus facilis officina sequaci materia fuit: in his tam parvis atque tam nullis quae ratio, quanta vis, quam inextricabilis perfectio! ubi tot sensus collocavit in culice? et sunt alia dictu minora - sed ubi visum in eo praetendit? ubi gustatum adplicavit? ubi odoratum inseruit? ubi vero truculentam illam et portione maximam vocem ingeneravit?*) [Pliny, *NH* 11.2]

**B2.** Then with what genius she provided a sharp weapon for piercing the skin, and as if working on a large object, although really it is invisibly minute, created it with alternating skill so as to be at once pointed for digging and tubed for sucking! (*telum vero perfodiendo tergori quo spiculavit ingenio atque, atque ut in capaci, cum cerni non possit exilitas, reciproca generavit arte, ut fodiendo acuminatum pariter sorbendoque fistulosum esset*!) [Pliny, *NH* 11.3]

**B3.** But we marvel at elephants’ shoulders carrying castles, and bulls’ necks and the fierce tossing of their heads, at the rapacity of tigers and the manes of lions, whereas really nature is to be found in her entirety nowhere more than in her smallest creations. I therefore beg my readers not to let their contempt for many of these creatures lead them also to scorn what I relate about them, since in the contemplation of nature nothing can possibly be deemed superfluous (*sed turrigeros elephantorum miramur umeros taurorumque colla et truces in sublime iactus, tigrium rapinas, leonum iubas, cum rerum natura nusquam magis quam in minimis tota sit. quaeso ne legentes, quoniam ex his spernunt multa, etiam relata fastidio damnent, cum in contemplatione naturae nihil possit videri supervacuum*) [Pliny, *NH* 11.4]

**B4.** We must not take on the study of the humbler animals (*ἀτιμοτέρων ζῴων*) reluctantly, as though we were children, since in all natural things there is something of the marvelous. There is a story which tells how some visitors once wished to meet Heraclitus, and when they entered and saw him in the kitchen, warming himself at the stove, they hesitated; but Heraclitus said, ‘Come in; don’t be afraid; there are gods even here(*εἶναι γὰρ καὶ ἐνταῦθα θεούς*).’ Similarly, we should not hesitate, but boldly enter upon our research on animals of every sort, knowing that nature and beauty inhabit everything [Aristotle, *De Partibus Animalium* 1.5, 645a]

**B5.** ‘The other stars of heaven glide swiftly on; by day and night they circle with the sky.’ A person desirous to observe the regularity of nature can never have his fill of the contemplation of those heavenly bodies (‘*cetera labuntur celeri caelestia motu cum caeloque simul noctesque diesque feruntur,’ quorum contemplatione nullius expleri potest animus naturae constantiam videre cupientis*) [Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 2.105]

**B6.** If ever you have come upon a grove that is full of ancient trees which have grown to an unusual height, shutting out a view of the sky (*conspectum caeli*) by a veil of intertwining branches, then the loftiness of the forest, the seclusion of the spot, and your marvel at the shade (*admiratio umbrae*) in the midst of the open spaces, will prove to you the presence of deity (*fidem tibi numinis faciet*). Or if a cave, made by the deep crumbling of the rocks, holds up a mountain on its arch, a place not built with hands but hollowed out into such spaciousness by natural causes, your soul will be deeply moved by a certain intimation of the existence of the sacred (*animum tuum quadam religionis suspicione percutiet*) [Seneca, *Epistulae* 41. 3-4]

**C. Embodying the Sacred II: Healing Herbs**

**C1.** Most people laugh at me for researching in these matters, and I am mocked for busying myself with trifles. It is, however, a great comfort to me in my vast toil to know that nature too, not I alone, is being scorned. For I shall show that she at least has not failed us, having put remedies even into herbs we dislike, considering that she has given healing properties even to those armed with prickles and thorns (*immo vero plerisque ultro etiam inrisui sumus ista commentantes atque frivoli operis arguimur, magno quamquam immensi laboris solatio, sperni cum rerum natura, quam certe non defuisse nobis docebimus et invisis quoque herbis inseruisse remedia, quippe cum medicinas dederit etiam aculeatis*) [Pliny, *NH* 22.15]

**C2.** These remain to be discussed next after those plants I mentioned in the preceding book, as even in them we cannot sufficiently apprehend and admire the forethought of nature. She had provided already the softplants I spoke of, which make pleasant foods; she had colored the remedies in flowers, and by the mere sight had attracted our attention, combining the helpful with the delightful (*haec enim proxime restant ex iis, quas priore libro nominavimus, in quibus ipsis providentiam naturae satis mirari amplectique non est. dederat quas diximus molles cibisque gratas, pinxerat remedia in floribus visuque ipso animos invitaverat etiam deliciis auxilia permiscens*)[Pliny, *NH* 22.16]

**C3.** Look, she has devised some so repellent to look at, so cruel to the touch, that we seem almost to hear the voice of nature justifying herself as she is making them; saying that she so creates them lest any greedy animal browse, any wanton hands steal, any careless steps crush, or any perching bird break; by defending them with these thorns, by arming them with weapons, she is making a protection and safety for her remedies. This very thing then that we hate in them has been devised for the sake of mankind (*en*, *excogitavit aliquas aspectu hispidas, tactu truces, ut tantum non vocem ipsius fingentis illas rationemque reddentis exaudire videamur, ne scilicet depascat avida quadripes, ne procaces manus rapiant, ne neglecta vestigia obterant ne insidens ales infringat, iis muniendo aculeis telisque armando, remediis ut tuta ac salva sint. ita hoc quoque, quod in iis odimus, hominum causa excogitatum est*) [Pliny, *NH* 22.17]

**C4.** What if nature should suddenly raise her voice, and inveigh against us so: ‘mortal, why such grave concern, that you indulge in such excessive complaints? Why do you bemoan and lament death? (*denique si vocem rerum natura repente / mittat et hoc alicui nostrum sic increpet ipsa: /*

*‘quid tibi tanto operest, mortalis, quod nimis aegris / luctibus indulges? quid mortem congemis ac fles*?)’ [Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 3.935-938]

**D. Embodying the Sacred III: Scented Soil**

**D1.** A soil which has a flavor of perfumes will be the best soil. And if we need an explanation as to what the nature of this desirable odor is, it is that which often occurs even when the ground is uncultivated, around sunset, at the place where the ends of rainbows have come down to earth, and when the soil has been drenched with rain after a long period of drought. The earth then sends out that divine breath of hers, of quite incomparable sweetness, which she has conceived from the sun. This is the odor which ought to be emitted when the earth is turned up, and once found it will deceive no one; and the scent of the soil will be the best criterion of its quality (*illa erit optima quae unguenta sapiet. quod si admonendi sumus, qualis sit terrae odor ille qui quaeritur, contingit saepe etiam quiescente ea sub occasum solis, in quo loco arcus caelestes deiecere capita sua, et cum a siccitate continua immaduit imbre. tunc emittit illum suum halitum divinum ex sole conceptum, cui conparari suavitas nulla possit. is esse e commota debebit, repertusque neminem fallet; ac de terra odor optime iudicabit*) [Pliny, *NH* 17.39]

**D2.** The reason for this fragrance is the same as it is in the case of the earth; for when the earth is thoroughly hot and burned throughout, whatever grows from it has a fragrant odor to begin with. For things containing a little moisture, if they are at all burned with fire, become fragrant; for the heat concocts this moisture…when the wood has been rained upon and then has concocted (liquid) by the heat that is in it, it releases the vapor coming to be in it…when this occurs, as people see nothing else distinctive except the rainbow they ascribe to it the cause of the fragrance [pseudo-Aristotle, *Problemata* 12.3 ~ *cf*. Theophrastus, *De Causis Plantarum* 6.17.7]

**D3.** All stars whose number cannot begin to be counted, all this assembly of heavenly bodies, this sun which drives its course so near to us, much greater than the entire globe of the earth, all draw their nourishment from the earth’s substance and share this nourishment among themselves and are sustained by no other means than by the exhalations of the earth (*nec ullo alio scilicet quam halitu terrarum sustinentur*) [Seneca, *Quaestiones Naturales* 6.16.2]

**D4.** The moon shows as much light from herself to the earth as itself conceives from the sun (*tantum ex se terris ostendat quantum ex sole ipsa concipiat*) [Pliny, *NH* 2.46]

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

* Ashbrook Harvey, S. 2016. “The Senses in Religion: Piety, Critique, Competition.” In J. Toner, ed., *A Cultural History of the Senses Volume I: Antiquity*, 91-114. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
* Bear, I. J. and Thomas, R. G. 1965. ‘Petrichor and Plant Growth.’ *Nature* 207: 1415–1416.
* Beagon, M. 1992. *Roman Nature: The Thought of Pliny the Elder.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
* Bonadeo, A. 2004. *Iride: un arco tra mito e natura*. Florence: Le Monnier Università.
* Caseau, B. 2014. “The Senses in Religion: Liturgy, Devotion, and Deprivation.” In R.G. Newhauser, ed., *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Age (500-1450*), 89-110. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
* Clements, A. 2015. “Divine Scents and Presence.” In M. Bradley, ed., *Smell and the Ancient Senses*, 46-59. London: Routledge.
* Geertz, A. 2010. ‘Brain, Body and Culture: A Biocultural Theory of Religion.’ *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 22: 304-332.
* Jan, L. and Mayhoff, K.F.T., eds. 1875-1906. *C. Plini Secundi Naturalis historiae libri XXXVII*. Leipzig: Teubner.
* Keane, W. 2008. ‘The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion.’ *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14: 110-127.
* Løkke H. 2008. “The Stoics on Sense Perception.” In S. Knuuttila and P. Kärkkäinen, eds., *Theories of Perception in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy*, 34-46. Dordrecht: Springer.
* Luciani, S. 2011. ‘L’art de la parole: pratique et pouvoir du discours. Lucrèce et la voix de la Nature.’ *Vita Latina* 183: 205-218.
* McHugh, J. 2011. ‘Seeing Scents: Methodological Reflections on the Intersensory Perception of Aromatics in South Asian Religions.’ *History of Religions* 51: 156-177.
* Pià Comella, J. 2014. *Une piété de la raison. Philosophie et religion dans le stoïcisme imperial:*

*des lettres à Lucilius de Sénèque aux pensées de Marc Aurèle*. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers.

* Rackham, H., Jones, W.H.S. and Eicholz, D.E., ed. and trans. 1938-1980. *Pliny: Natural History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
* Rodriguez-Plate, S. B. 2012. ‘The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred.’ *CrossCurrents* 62: 162-180.
* Rubbarth, S.M. 2004. ‘The Meaning(s) of αισθησιϛ in Ancient Stoicism.’ *Phoenix*: 58: 319-344.
* Setaioli, A. 2007. ‘Seneca and the Divine: Stoic Tradition and Personal Developments.’ *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 13: 333-368.
* Webb, M. 2011. ‘Religious Experience.’ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* N. Zalta ed. URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/religious-experience/> (accessed April 5, 2018)
* Yandell, K. 1993. *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Cambridge.
1. The text of Pliny is from Mayhoff’s 1875 Teubner edition; translations are adapted from Rackham 1938. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)