
**Reviewed by** Prudence Gibson (University of New South Wales)

**Published on** H-Environment (November, 2023)

**Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

**Finite Finitude in a Time of Extinction**

In his recent book, *The Phoenix Complex: A Philosophy of Nature*, Michael Marder presents a surprising but compelling argument. He proposes that in this current epoch, death no longer represents or assures new life. Once a triumphant and worthy opponent for masterful humans, Earth is now a victim. The phoenix, who conventionally and perpetually rose from the ashes once the sun hit its aged wings, is no longer a promise of eternal renewal.

Marder is a professor at the University of Basque Country in Spain. His international reputation rests on his research and writing in environmental and ecological philosophy, especially critical plant studies, or plant humanities. Two of his best-loved books are *Plant Thinking* (2013) and *The Philosopher’s Plant* (2014). Along with essays and other books, these volumes address the key concerns of human relationships with the vegetal world through philosophy, myth, politics, and the arts. The impact and influence of Marder’s thinking across multiple countries and fields of study is evidenced in his infinite citations, for he is widely considered the principal philosopher of this field.

In *The Phoenix Complex* Marder diverts from vegetal theory and focuses on the legend of the cyclical bird. Conventionally we associate death with life. We think of how plants are regenerated after fire or from composted matter. Things die, decompose, and then new life rises from that enriched soil. However, what Marder proposes is that the endless cycles of life and death no longer function in the same way. Death may now be just death, not new life.

Marder’s book interrogates the concept of finite finitude in the natural world. Marder starts and ends with the phoenix. The phoenix, according to early eighth-century narratives, starts to collect aromatic twigs to make a nest, in time for old age to approach. Then as the sun’s rays catch its wings, it allows itself to be consumed by fire so
that it can rise up from the ashes, to start life anew.

The significance of Marder’s phoenix complex theory is that repetition and renewal have allowed humans a false reassurance—a certainty that finitude is inexhaustible. Don’t worry about overfishing or careless farming, because either a Judaeo-Christian god will provide, or our myths and legends will continue to promise prophecies that all will end well. Through these mistakes, we have forgotten to cherish the finite in finitude, the end in the very end. Being, Marder says, is a non-renewable. If his phoenix can no longer emerge from the ashes, then his work also raises provocations about the efficacy of renewables, whether as energy sources or as political solutions.

The scope of Marder’s book is, as always, vast but meticulous. His chapter on Hindu traditions, for which he researched via the Sanskrit texts, took over six months to write. As a structure, there are four chapters in which Marder pairs two philosophers whose work either addresses the phoenix or references the regeneration and rebirth associated with the mythical tale. His first pairing is Plato (428-328 BC) and Emmanuel Levinas (1905-95).

Marder reminds us that life's finitude is “a shared root across theological and philosophical thought” (p. 29). Reincarnation is a sensitive issue because humans are forced to recognize their past selves in nonhuman forms, which can create discomfort for some. Replaceability is at the heart of reincarnation, as it is with the phoenix complex. Marder believes Levinas’s philosophy bears the mark of the phoenix, particularly his ideas around “substitution,” which Marder sees as subject production or biological/social renewal. Marder rhetorically asks whether concepts renew themselves too.

Marder’s second pairing is Aristotle (Greek philosopher, 384-22 BC) and Georg Hegel (German philosopher, 1770-1831). According to Aristotle as well as Judaeo-Christian tradition, the body is resurrected. So, the phoenix is not just symbol of resurrection but also of the soul. Aristotle’s interest in the phoenix is scant but he does talk about the time span of life or the life of the cosmic soul as limited and termed. Marder’s Aristotle refers to the duration of life and its tendency to burn. Therefore, there is the potential for a perpetual, fiery and vegetal rebirth. Marder notes that in Hegel’s 1824 lectures, the phoenix represents a “divine process” where death is converted into the ground of rejuvenated life (p. 79).

The third pairing is Plotinus (Egyptian philosopher, 205-70 CE) and Friedrich Schelling (German philosopher, 1775-1854). For Plotinus, it is the singularity of the phoenix that allows it to become whole, and one of a kind. Plotinus’s contemplation of the phoenix results in emergence as a symbol/image of the soul/nature (p. 90). The phoenix is dedicated to the sun—when the sun’s ray strikes the nest. Drawing a longer bow for Schelling, Marder discusses Schelling’s interest in oxygen, which enables burning and is itself remnant of the burned (p. 115). But Schelling says, “there is no life without simultaneous death” (p. 117).

Marder’s final pairing is Baruch Spinoza (Dutch philosopher, 1632-77) and the twelfth-century abbess, mystic, and composer St. Hildegard of Bingen (German 1098-179). Marder notes that Hildegard does not write about phoenixes but does talk about the phoenix date palm in her encyclopaedia Physica. Marder traces her concept of viriditas, which is vegetal heat and another kindling of life (p. 129). Spinoza’s thinking was in opposition to the mystical concepts of Hildegard. But Spinoza writes that God and nature do not experience physical human death, where body and soul are separated. The first birth is where the body and soul connect and the second birth is spiritual potentiation. So, Spinoza thinks of regeneration as rebirth (p. 143).

Marder also investigates Hindu and Confucian traditions of rebirth. Like the Greek-Roman phoenix, there are also the Egyptian bennu,
Chinese fenghuang, Persian simorgh, and Muslim anqa (p. 149). These have additional connections with cosmic and historical scales. Some of these narratives linger on ever-young beauty, or on black and white, or on awakening. They refer variously to effacing death, divine birth, or the underworld. But the stories, at their heart, are similar in their concern with never-ending birth.

Finally, Marder turns to Hannah Arendt (German philosopher, 1906-75), because of the phoenix's interconnections with second births or rebirths. These complex, subsequent births are repetitions of an absent original birth. The change is changeless, says Marder (p. 230), who notes that Arendt thinks that births and deaths are not present in nature but introduced. Birth, death, and rebirth are not natural occurrences.

What is particularly interesting about Marder's phoenix-flight through these thinkers and bodies of thought is that he has created or introduced his own rebirth. In September 2023, some months after the release of the book, Marder collaborated with philosopher and performance artist Stefanie Wenner on a ritual event in Berlin. The title was In due time: a ritual against reproduction. This title refers to the theorization of performance art as an action that cannot be reproduced and must not participate in the capitalist structures of reproduction. But it also refers to Marder's concerns with human misunderstandings of reproduction, rebirth, or regeneration. Marder is right: we need to stop making excuses for extinctions, we need to understand the true capacities/limits of renewables, and we need to resist or refuse the capitalist structures that perpetually forgive our human errors. The greatest of human errors it not to see the finitude of finitude.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59683

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.