

Symphony of Silences

A Journey Through a Multicentric World

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In memory of

my mother

Wilma Rudick

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At sea



I HAVE EMBARKED ON A VOYAGE. I BLINK, AND I SEE THE OCEAN AROUND ME. My vessel is floating amidst silky shades of crystal and green and blue. My eyes behold delicate drapes strewn with the movements of waves and of clouds. No line disturbs the transition from waters into skies. A lantern is dangling at the bow of my vessel, tinkling rhythmically against the wooden planks. I blink again, and my eyes focus on that awkward inscription at the base of the lantern. It reads:

*Is it possible to speak about the way
others experience in their own, particular ways?*

I look up again, momentarily disoriented as my eyes widen to take in the vastness around them. And while the tinkling continues to drum its solemn, quiet beat through my ears, through my body, I am reminded again of the reasons I have come out here for.

A first orientation

Use usual words and say unusual things.

- Arthur Schopenhauer -



The inscription

“THE MAIN DIFFICULTY IS STILL TO IDENTIFY THE EXACT QUESTIONS WE ARE asking,” writes Mary Midgley in *Science and Poetry* (2001:171). Throughout her book, Midgley weaves a thread of attentiveness for the importance of addressing every problem with appropriate questions.

This thesis has a single objective: to unearth the question inscribed at the base of the lantern.

The craft of philosophers is to pose questions, and to search for answers. The intuitive answer to our guiding question is: *Of course it is not possible*. In his famous article “What is it like to be a bat?”, Thomas Nagel (1993) arrived at a corresponding answer: We cannot know what it is like to be a bat. Yet this is not all there is to our question. Between the intuitive answer and the inscription at the base of the lantern spans a murky horizon, an unexplored realm in which the *meaning* of the question lies concealed. This thesis, then, does not immediately search for an answer. It searches for the meaning of the question itself.

Sounding out the style

This thesis unfolds as a narrative. It finds itself placed firmly in the phenomenological tradition of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and David Abram. Both philosophers are concerned with the way in which the style of a discourse “tacitly

works to either enable, or to stifle, the solidarity between the human community and the more-than-human earth.”¹ And both philosophers not only pay tribute to this concern by making it a direct venue of their deliberations. They also, and perhaps more importantly, try to *enact* their concern through an appropriate and rich style of conversing, a style that celebrates the evocative powers of language.

In a similar way, this work is a search for ways of speaking that spawn fresh meaning. My work demands that I do not speak in conventional, ready-made ways, for meaning can only continue to be created if we honor the living, ever-shifting nexus that we call language, and if we do not try to erect walls around it. My trials ask for great humility, and they demand of myself a real effort of expression. But they also demand a real effort of comprehension from my readers. I deliver myself gladly to my readers, fully aware that if they are unwilling to be my companions on this trying journey, the journey is destined to fail from the start. I ask them to join me so that together we may try to slowly, slowly swing from a solidified soliloquy into a somatic song.

The readers will hardly find it fruitful to search a corridor behind the words, or behind the narrative style. It will do no good to strip the thesis naked until its bony figure stands before the intellect in full exposure. The words and structure are no haphazard costumes cast above bare arguments, only to make their nudity a little less appalling and a little easier to stomach. The style I have tried to harvest is no mere barrier to purely logical formulae. I have worked towards a unity of content and form, for I found it to be the most promising means to begin summoning voices and sounds from a heaving sea of silences. And that is what the thesis is about: making a beginning.

This narrative approach to ethics is a way of *performing*, why, *living* ethics that has little to do with the more analytical method of meticulously deducing moral axioms from elaborate systems. It demands of the readers that they become active participants – conspirators – in the process themselves. The readers must not expect to be served readily processed morsels of ‘moral wisdom’, pre-digested axioms that are easy to swallow, and that relieve them, if

¹ Abram: *Between the Body and the Breathing Earth: A Reply to Ted Toadvine*

ever so lightly, of some of the inconveniences of moral decision-making in a world that does not halt in its step. What the readers *can* expect, though, is that they will be invited to relate to their own experience, and to pick up thoughts as they are reading, so they can weave them into a garment that fits *them*.

Mapping the journey ahead

Because the territory of our impending journey is vast and fluid, the reader will be grateful for a map of some kind. Therefore I here add a sketch of the story about to unfold. Just like any other map, it is meant to be used for orientation, now and later.

This narrative begins with a discussion of approaches to ecological ethics that are largely *normative*. But all normative claims are tightly entwined with how we *describe* the world. If we now find this descriptive layer to be flawed, the old normative claims lose their foundation. This story uncovers such a flaw in the descriptive layer. And while it does not entirely rule out normative claims, these play a secondary role. The narrative as a whole then becomes the search for a more attuned way of *describing the world*. It works towards a phenomenological account of a multicentric world.

Chapter One iterates the events that have led to my embarking. It develops a first presentiment of the theme that resurfaces again and again throughout the journey: the silence of others. The chapter makes this silence audible among the dominating concentric approaches to ecological ethics, and it suggests a critical collaboration between varying unifying holistic ethics that can inspire listening more attentively again.

Chapter Two shows how the silence of others is wrought and actively maintained by the practice of definition. It argues that acts of definition set up barriers to our hearing. They are sources of noise beyond which it becomes harder and harder to hear anything but our own clamor. Relational language use

is introduced as a measure to reverse our coercive silencing of others, and to seek mutually enriching relationships.

As this journey draws its momentum from the creative force of direct experience, it is direct, lived experience that we must eventually turn to. The narrative must, in other words, at some point transmute from merely *advocating experience* into *experiencing* itself. This shift takes place in Chapter Three. The chapter presents an account of my journey to the killer whales off the Northern Norwegian coast. But the reader will find the account to be overshadowed, once more, by acts of defining that thwart creative relationships with others. The chapter exposes a particular way in which others are being defined and silenced: conventional whale watching tourism. It demonstrates how whales are being silenced through the transformative powers of technology, and how they are objectified into being both a monetary object and an object of dreams.

These three chapters flow together in the final chapter, *The poetry of leisure*. Here we gather the accumulated evidence of all preceding discussions in order to confront the question at the base of the lantern most directly. What is the meaning of asking whether we can speak about the way others experience? And as we ponder this meaning carefully, we must remain attentive to what our findings imply: How far will the question take us?

As a final introductory note, let me point out that this story is not initially told *chronologically*. Readers will find this note especially important for their comprehension of Chapter One. But what may appear like a compositional flaw, or perhaps like ‘artistic freedom’, is none of that. It is actually part of a binding necessity in the overall composition of this story. At the end of this thesis we must return to this thought. The Postscript unravels the reasons for why the narrative has been composed the way it stands now.

The land behind us, the world ahead

The man who cannot think for himself, going beyond what other men have learned or thought, is still enslaved to other men's ideas. Obviously the goal of learning to think is even more difficult than the goal of learning to learn. But difficult as it is we must add it to our list. It is simply not enough to be able to get up a subject of one's own, like a good encyclopedia employee, even though any college would take pride if all its graduates could do so. To be fully human means in part to think one's own thoughts, to reach a point at which, whether one's ideas are different from or similar to other men's, they are one's own.

- Wayne C. Booth -

As we struggle to awaken from the dream of total dominion, we find ourselves struggling to understand the world as it is.

- Freeman House -



Retrospect

AS EVERY OCEAN-GOING VOYAGE, THIS JOURNEY STARTED ON LAND. THE LAND from which I embarked is a land of people. It is a land of cities, fields, villages, a land hustling and bustling with the voices and sounds of people. In this land, there has been talk of a crisis. People whisper at the windows. Hushed voices are intercepted by wake-up calls. Wake-up calls are drowned by the sounds of engines, construction sites, air conditioners, talk of taxes, or of sports. But the whispering continues. Sometimes severe storms haunt the land. Sometimes a fatal poison seeps into its soil. Sometimes the papers report that yet another species has become extinct. If it weren't for the papers, sorrowful news of this kind could perhaps easily be overlooked, because an estimated ninety-eight per cent of all species known to the people are arthropods, most of them unknown to

the majority of people, some of them straightforwardly unappreciated – among them creatures that cause unease because they stagger on eight legs, or because they crawl into sleeping bags on sleepovers outside, or because their unsettling buzzing is sometimes complemented by a small sting into the earlobe, or the arm. There is also talk of imminent wars caused by quarrels over access to energy supplies, or of mass migrations set in motion by rains that will not stop, or by rains that will not come. Too many people now inhabit the land. More are being born still, putting a further strain on the land, and making the prospect of a peaceful future even dimmer. Why, some people are even beginning to seriously question the prospect of a *livable* future for our current civilization, because, as is becoming ever clearer, the world is in a state of fever, and it is expected that the temperature is rising still. All those events – and many more – might only be coincidences, but again and again there are voices that insist they are all *connected*. People start asking questions. Who did this? Who is doing this? Some people suggest that it is the people themselves. Some people begin to ask: If we are doing this, then how must we change our behavior to stop doing what we are doing, and to start acting in more benign ways? Among them are people who think that a mere change of action cannot be sufficient in the face of what we have maneuvered ourselves in to. With a profound anguish in their hearts, and an urge in their voices, they utter that the people “... need, most of all, a change of heart and mind that comes to tribal nations when they sense real danger”, as James Lovelock (2006:18) does. So some people suggest that one ought to begin to be more caring towards what they call ‘the environment’. They suggest that if one were to include parts of that so-called ‘environment’ into moral considerations, then these parts would be protected from invasion, from wanton destruction, from extinction. And if that environment were protected, it would continue to be a place that sustains their cities, their fields, their villages.

Questions such as these have given rise to a large expedition, and a common header was soon found for its joint task: *environmental ethics*. If ethics in general asks whom we ought to include into our circle of moral considerations, then, clearly, the banner ‘environmental ethics’ indicated a direction into which

this question would be developed: How far ought we to “expand our circle” (cf. Singer 1981) into this ‘environment’ of ours? Peter Singer encapsulated the rationale for the expedition in the words: “The general question, then, is how the effects of our actions on the environment of nonhuman beings should figure in our deliberations about what we ought to do.” (2003:55)

The expedition – myself included – set out, remembering that the cities and fields and villages are all built around the foot of a large mountain. We set out to climb ever higher up the mountain, hoping that that the expanding view would help settle this urgent question.

Part I. Trekking up the mountain

AS OUR TREK MOVED UP THE MOUNTAIN, IT BECAME CLEAR THAT “THE TERRAIN” which environmental ethics set out to explore “is rich” (Light & Rolston III 2003:10). In addition to being rich, it also proliferated vastly, so that any attempt to recollect some of its dominating forces must of necessity remain incomplete, emphasize some themes at the expense of others, and simplify what is contested and complex.² Connected to this is another problem, namely that the very boundaries of environmental ethics are fuzzy. As Ott & Gorke (2000:10) said, environmental ethics does not constitute a self-contained and specialized field. Rather, its very being is *interdisciplinary*. Environmental ethics, they said, stands “in close interaction with ecological, social-psychological, political, and ontological questions”. However, as my intention here is to recollect how I have come to be sitting in this small vessel, led by a lantern with a nebulous inscription, I will accept these drawbacks and focus henceforth predominantly on the aspects of the expedition that are most important for my recollection. For this, I draw on exemplary advocates of the different positions. Completeness is not the

² For a selection of different maps of this terrain, cf. for example Gorke 1999; Ott 2000; Potthast 2000; Light & Rolston III 2003; Palmer 2003. Ott (2000:19) writes that particularly the Anglo-American community of environmental ethics has fanned out in a way that makes an overview problematic even to insiders.

intention. My predominant interest lies not so much in a detailed evaluation of all arguments entailed, as it lies in implicit *strategies of arguing*.

The trek debates: anthropocentrists

The first who spoke out among us called themselves *anthropocentrists*. Generally, anthropocentrists claimed that moral duty to others besides humans – whatever this moral duty might entail in detail – could only be *indirect*. They claimed that others are best considered ethically in terms of their *instrumental* values to human beings. Some early core representatives of this group include Aristotle, Baruch Spinoza, or Immanuel Kant. Anthropocentrism has been and currently still is the dominant worldview in the Western Hemisphere. Because of that, the *burden of proof* habitually lies with those who wish to widen the moral circle, and not the other way around. One needs not, in other words, defend why our moral considerations ought *only* to include humans. According to the dominating view, one must sooner justify why one wishes to *expand* the moral circle beyond humans.

Among the anthropocentrists was Bryan Norton. In an exemplary way, Norton claimed that “an environmental ethic cannot be derived, first, from rights or interests of nonhumans and second, from rights or interests of future generations of humans.” (2003:163). The only ground on which a true environmental ethic could be erected would be a single, central value principle, namely that of ongoing *human life* and *consciousness*. For throughout all ethical evaluation it is always humans, according to this view, who are evaluating, and who are negotiating the criteria of evaluation among themselves. The goal of such an ethic would be to ensure an indefinite “resource allocation” (Ibid. 170) for continued human life. If human life depends on a livable planet, anthropocentrists argued, then we must make sure that the planet continues to be livable. Others who were not humans – other animals, trees, fungi, lakes, or mountain ranges – were unable to negotiate with us humans the precise criteria of our morals, so they could not have a direct, inherent value. And if they could not have any direct value, they were only valuable in relation to humans. Being

looked at as so-called ‘resources’, they depended, in short, on their *usefulness* to humans.

It soon became evident that a number of specific criticisms against this position were variations of the same, recurring theme: Anthropocentrism is fundamentally built on contingency, or *arbitrariness*.

Take, as a *first* example of this criticism, a *metaethical* problem that was briefly indicated above: ‘The greatest obstacle to expanding the moral community’, anthropocentrists said, ‘is lacking mutuality’. How, they asked, could others possibly be intrinsically valuable if they are unable to negotiate with us humans the terms of the moral community? It was Martin Gorke (1999:260) who confronted this question. What the anthropocentric position oversees is that mutuality – or the lack of it – is no valid criterion of *interhuman morals*, either. Very small children, for example, cannot communicate on moral terms. Neither can a number of mentally handicapped persons. Neither can people who have fallen into a coma. But do we deny these people a value of their own because of that? We do not. We do not, in other words, decide to draw an *arbitrary* line called ‘mutuality’ throughout our own kin. We have begun to acknowledge that all humans, regardless their age, origin, state of health, gender, or any other conceivable dividing factor, are in principle intrinsically valuable, and thus worthy of moral consideration. Yet, Gorke asks – if mutuality is no valid criterion in *interhuman* ethics, why, then, should it be one in *environmental* ethics? To demand mutuality of others would be an act of arbitrariness.³

A *second* example that illustrates anthropocentrism’s arbitrariness is a *pragmatic* one. We have not yet mentioned that Norton marked himself not as a hard-line anthropocentrist, but as a mediator who attempted to reconcile various positions. It was in view of this role that he set apart two very different versions of anthropocentrism (2003:165). The first is *strong anthropocentrism*. It explains all

³ It would also be a naturalistic fallacy, because a strictly *human* criterion would be taken as evidence to deny intrinsic worth to *others* who are not humans.

value “by reference to satisfactions or felt preferences of human individuals” alone. Norton himself rejected this strong position in favor of what he called *weak anthropocentrism*. In a somewhat technical lingo, Norton pointed out what distinguishes weak anthropocentrism. Weak anthropocentrism explains all value “by reference to satisfaction of some felt preference of a human individual or by reference to its bearing upon the ideals which exist as elements in a world view essential to determinations of considered preferences.” This means in practice that value is not only placed on people’s felt preferences – as it is in strong anthropocentrism –, but also on *the process of value formation*. And this, Norton argued, would draw “nature” back into the realm of values (through the back-door, so to speak). In weak anthropocentrism, “nature” takes on the role of a “teacher of values” (Ibid.). It is still not granted intrinsic value. It is still not seen as a *holder* or *place* of value. It is, rather, a *source* of value that helps generate and mold human values. As such it would be worthy of protection, Norton said.

But even weak anthropocentrism could not eliminate the fundamental conflict, arbitrariness. What, for example, if humans decide that a particular species cannot teach them anything worthwhile? If that species is found to lack any value as a source or teacher of human morals? What if the common reaction to a specific other is not care or curiosity, but repulsion or fear? Who except for a select few would think of all those spiders, mosquitoes, or scorpions as teachers, instructors, mentors? Or what if a vulnerable landscape is so remote that its value as a teacher of morals to a critical mass of humans amounts to practically zero? Neither strong nor weak anthropocentrism could, for example, justify why it should be wrong to drill for oil and minerals in Alaska, or to exploit the deep seas for human purposes. Both places are inaccessible for most of us. But does that mean they have no worth? In none of these examples, anthropocentrism would be able to side with the endangered ones.

Norton’s suggestion to invite others into our morals through appointing them to be our teachers is a subargument of anthropocentrism’s general stance: Others are judged on the basis of their *usefulness* to us. But precisely in this lies the problem: what is useful, and what is not, is a matter of taste, convention, or

circumstance. But taste, convention, and circumstance are arbitrary categories. As long as others are defined solely via their usefulness for our own purposes, they will constantly be threatened by replacement, oblivion, or extinction.

With these thoughts in mind, our trek decided to move on further up the mountain. We asked ourselves: Is there a way to overcome arbitrariness?

The debate continues: sentientists

Just a little further up the mountain, those who called themselves *pathocentrists*, or alternatively, *sentientists*, spoke out. They asked: ‘What if we expanded the moral circle to include also *sentient beings*? As we judge the situation, there are a number of good arguments in favor of our position: Sentience is a condition for the ability to *suffer*. Suffering, as well as the ability to experience pleasure, is an expression of *interest*. Interest, in turn, must then be a prerequisite for intrinsic value.’ This view was expressed, among others, by Peter Singer. Singer said: “Where our actions are likely to make animals suffer, that suffering must count in our deliberations, and it should count equally with a like amount of suffering by human beings, insofar as rough comparisons can be made” (2003:59). From this, Singer drew the opposing conclusion that “just as nonconscious beings have no interest, so unconscious life lacks intrinsic value” (2003:60). A problem that Singer’s position had to deal with was one we briefly touched on in the discussion of anthropocentrism: the problem of *replaceability* (cf. Palmer 2003:19). Since Singer did not value the sentient being itself, but rather its total *sentient experience*, he opened a path to replacing one such being by another by killing the first painlessly. Singer reacted by setting up the dichotomy ‘conscious’ vs. ‘self-conscious’. Conscious beings, he argued, share with the self-conscious beings the ability to experience pleasure and pain. However, in contrast to self-conscious beings they lack self-awareness, which is why they have no preference as to whether they ‘want’ to go on living or not. From this, Singer argued that conscious beings were indeed replaceable, but self-conscious beings were not (Ibid.).

Pathocentrism, too, aroused opponents, and it would turn out that although the details of the counterargument differed from those against anthropocentrism, both shared a central intuition: Like anthropocentrism, pathocentrism rested on preliminary judgments that were *arbitrary*. The most serious variation of this argument criticized the narrow way in which pathocentrism defined *interest*. Dietmar v.d. Pfordten said this notion was so vague that “all depends on its interpretation” (in: Gorke 1999:262; own translation). Gorke (1999:262 f.) added that in fact, the term was but an arbitrary semantic construction, at times including invertebrates and plants, at times not. It all depended on a more or less rigid *definition* of what it meant to have interest. Thomas Potthast joined into the chorus of objections by adding that “the *biological* demarcation remains highly problematic because ‘suffering’ is an anthropomorphic construction of intentional experience which is difficult to determine.” (2000:121; own translation) This view was also shared by John Rodman, who found that the identification of value with sentient experience was just another form of anthropocentrism, “since it picks a quality paradigmatically possessed by human beings and uses it as a measure by which to judge other species.” (in: Palmer 2003:21) Paul Taylor positioned himself against pathocentrists as well and said: “[T]he concept of a being’s good is not coextensive with sentience or the capacity of feeling pain.” (2003:75) Ultimately, Gorke drew attention to the fact that pathocentrists did not dissolve the fundamental problem of anthropocentrism, namely the “dichotomy between a postulated center and its resource reservoir” (1999:244). The only difference between the two positions was that pathocentrists did not claim that humans were the sole center, but that a single *phylum* – namely largely all vertebrates – constituted such a center. Vertebrates, however, make up less than three percent of all species. All such species that are most fundamental for the continuation of life on Earth – plants and microorganisms – would be excluded from the moral circle (Ibid.). In essence, the problem remained unchanged: Both anthropocentrism and pathocentrism were founded on assumptions that were arbitrary.

Higher and higher: biocentrists

So we strode on. Further up the mountain still, those who called themselves *biocentrists* began to speak. They suggested: ‘What if we include not only all sentient beings, but all other *living beings* into our moral considerations? The problems with limiting ourselves to sentient beings have become apparent enough. While we cannot arbitrarily define ‘interest’ as a conscious striving, what we can safely assume is that all life expresses *some form of interest*. Through this expanded notion of ‘interest’, we achieve a much greater moral community.’

Among the biocentrists, there were varying opinions as to whether there could be gradations of value on the so-called *scala naturae* (which would imply a *gradualistic* biocentric ethic), or whether such gradations were unnecessary (which would imply an *egalitarian* biocentric ethic).

Dietmar v.d. Pfordten (1996) represented the former group. He claimed that all living beings who are able to unfold *independent strivings* were to be considered ethically. Hence, his ultimate criterion against which to test moral relevance was the level of *self-reference* (“Selbstbezug”). The more complex and intensive a being’s self-referential strivings, the more value this being possessed. The interest of plants, for instance, would be considered much weaker than human interest, and hence their value would be inferior to human value.

Paul Taylor (1986; 2003), another member of this group, took an egalitarian stance. Taylor denied human superiority with regard to what is valuable, and what is not: “One who accepts [the doctrine of species impartiality, and thus rejects the doctrine of human superiority,] regards all living things as possessing inherent worth – the *same* inherent worth, since no one species has been shown to be ‘higher’ or ‘lower’ than any other.” (2003:83) Taylor further claimed that unique characteristics which humans believe to be the benchmarks for value, such as rational thought, aesthetic creativity, autonomy and self-determination, or moral freedom, might be valuable from a strictly *human* point of view alright. But, Taylor asked, how can the good of *all* living beings be determined strictly by what is best for *a single* form of life? Such species

fascism, such “irrational bias in our own favor” (2003:76), must be avoided at all costs. Such bias would be, once more, arbitrary. Instead, each organism is to be acknowledged “as a teleological center of life, pursuing its own good in its own way.” (Ibid.)

Among the critics against biocentrism, Gorke (1999:244) distinguished himself once more. His criticism was twofold. *First*, Gorke argued that biocentrism upheld the dichotomy between a single center and its periphery, in that it only accredited *animate* matter its own reality, but not *inanimate* matter. Gorke said that such sharp divide was hardly plausible, not least because all life has arisen out of inanimate matter, and that the absolute rupture which biocentrism implies is difficult to justify⁴. Gorke’s *second* objection was directed at the pragmatic deliberation that in accord with all preceding positions, biocentrism, too, was an *individualistic ethic*. The disagreement among biocentrists, here shown in an exemplary way between v.d. Pfordten and Taylor, was directed solely at how far or narrow the notion of ‘interest’ ought to be understood. What they shared was the view that *species* cannot have interest, and that they therefore cannot become admitted to the moral circle. *Third*, Gorke pointed out that the attempt to expand the understanding of ‘interest’ to include also ecosystems or species (‘self-regulation’; ‘self-identity’) was met with great objections by many philosophers, because such an extreme widening of what it means to have interest would cause this notion to evaporate, until it is “hardly more than a metaphor which would lead further astray than it would illuminate ...” (Ibid.; own translation). Even though biocentrism tried to expand the notion of interest, it upheld the previous positions’ main problem: It drew an arbitrary line through being, then rested all its moral judgments onto this arbitrary decision. In this, all individualistic ethics were incompatible with the most basic lesson we have been taught by ecology: Our living planet cannot be looked at as a simple array of *individuals*. It also consists of a community of hierarchically structured *wholes* (Ibid. 1999:245). But, some of us said, ethical positions which aspire a ‘good life’ without paying heed to this insight, and which might prompt

⁴ This thought will be picked up again and developed further in the following chapter.

actions that could corrupt this good life permanently, had to be rejected as failures. So we decided to move on.

Surprise at the summit

At length we arrived at the peak of the mountain. And what a surprise the peak held in store for us! For the first time we saw that the giant mountain – at whose foot are built all our villages and cities and fields – was actually *an island*! In the far and hazy distance, we saw that all around our island stretched out a vast ocean. There was water on all sides, shrouding the island in an unbroken line, forming a giant, circular horizon around our vision. With this impression branded into our hearts, we set up camp for the night. It would turn out to be a long night with engaged discussions and little sleep.

Smoldering discontent

When we settled around the small fire we had set up to fight the biting chill of the summit winds, none of us could say for sure whether our expedition so far was a success or not. Our immediate task had been to find a solution to the common question that had bound all of us together, and that had driven us up the mountain in the first place: How far ought we to expand the moral circle? Yet in the end, opinions had proliferated, arguments had solidified, a single question had been answered in many different ways.

But some of us – myself included – became disgruntled with the way the discourse had evolved so far. ‘We have seen the sea’, we said. ‘How can we be so sure that our answers are appropriate if we seek to expand from our own center, the place of humans? How can we think we have universal answers without even having considered what lies beyond the horizon? It may be understandable that these expansive ethical positions talk about “widening the moral circle” to include also “nonhumans” into that circle. After all, moral duties have largely been conceivable only with regard to other humans for more than 3000 years. But we have seen that our *home*, or *house*, for which the Greeks once

had the name *oikos*, is not only this island that we inhabit. We have seen – or rather, we have begun to suspect – that our home may be more than that, and by far.’

Finally, we said: ‘Rather than trying to *expand* the moral community – rather than trying to look from down the vast mountain – , let us *begin* by assuming that all there is, within our own horizon and beyond, is morally relevant to our action, simply because *it is*.’

A question of the appropriate name

I proposed that we direct our immediate pondering over the implications of our magnificent discovery – that we live on an island – to an issue that can be easily overlooked: the name of our expedition. I asked: Is not the name ‘environmental ethics’ discriminating? This was an uneasy question, considering that the name had quickly flourished among many of the expedition members⁵. But my question was not only outside the mainstream. It was also highly significant.

Literary theory speaks of ‘telling names’. By this are meant storied names of literary characters that ‘tell’ us something crucial about a character’s personality, or their history. Old Norse mythology, for example, abounds with such telling names. *Odin* is but the most prominent instance. Derived from an intricate etymology, the name ‘Odin’ bespeaks the rich facets of this iridescent god. The Old Norse adjective *óðr* means ‘furious’, ‘obsessed’, ‘enraged’, and designates Odin as a god of warfare⁶. The nouns *óðr* and *óður* mean ‘poem’, ‘thought’, or ‘unrest’, and show Odin to be also a god of intellectual force, of poetry, of rune wizardry. Telling names are also a popular stylistic device in modern literature. Astrid Lindgren’s celebrated novel *Bröderna Lejonhjärta* (*The Brothers Lionheart*, 1973), for example, begins with a scene in which the older

⁵ Recent anthologies such as *Environmental Ethics – An Anthology* by Light and Rolston (2003), or *Spektrum der Umweltethik* by Ott and Gorke (2000), bespeak this trend, as does the fact that Germany’s only professorship established within the discipline – at the Ernst Moritz Arndt University of Greifswald in 1997 – bears that same name. The names of various academic journals further indicate the trend: “Environmental Ethics”; “Environmental Values”; “Agricultural and Environmental Ethics”; “Ethics and the Environment”; “Newsletter of the International Society of Environmental Ethics”.

⁶ Traces of this meaning live on in Modern High German ‘Wut’, which developed through the Anglo Saxon *Woden* and the Old High German *Wōdan*, *Wuotan*.

of two brothers, Jonatan, shoulders his seriously ill younger brother Karl to jump out of a burning building together. While Karl is saved from burning alive, Jonatan – who has proved to have the heart of a lion – is killed through the fall. The telling name ‘Lionheart’ has of course a prominent historical model. The English king Richard I. (1157-1199) was called ‘the Lionhearted’ because of his military reputation. Interestingly, his brother and successor to the throne bore the much less favorable telling name John Lackland, due to his lack of an inheritance as the youngest son, and his loss of territories to France.

In a parallel fashion, the name ‘environmental ethics’, too, would be best understood as a telling name. I impressed my observation on the others that next to telling about the historical origins of the discipline – which begun by asking how the circle can be expanded towards what was then conceived to be *the environment* – it also, and more importantly, told about a particular *world view* that those who accepted the term continued to defend, be it consciously or subconsciously. What world view might have been implied in the dominating name? The term ‘environment’ denotes ‘the state of being environed’. ‘To environ’ means, among others, ‘to surround’; ‘to encircle’; ‘to envelop’; ‘to enclose’. Its direct German rendition is ‘Umwelt’, which means ‘around-world’. Thus, an ‘environmental ethic’ questions human action with regard to what is *around* – and thereby strictly separated from – *humans*.

Angelika Krebs (1997; 2000:67) agreed with me so far. She suggested therefore that we name our discipline ‘ethics of nature’. But I found it ambiguous. So I spoke:

‘Krebs’s name is ambiguous for two reasons. *The first reason* is that, as Hans-Dieter Mutschler (2000:251 ff.) has shown, the word ‘nature’ has been used in two fundamentally different ways by different authors, which is why the name ‘ethics of nature’ will cause a great deal of confusion. Mutschler calls the *first* use of the word *Nat_{tot}*. ‘Nature’ seen in this way denotes the totality of all that exists; a ‘philosophy of nature’ is considered to be the *primary* philosophy. According to Mutschler, metaphysical authors such as Whitehead, Meyer-Abich, or Jonas are among those that use ‘nature’ in this way, but also

positivists such as Carnap or Kanitschneider. The *second* way in which ‘nature’ is used is referred to by Mutschler as *Nat_{reg}*, by which is meant that ‘nature’ is but a local, or regional, occurrence. Prominent authors in favor of this second use of the term are Aristotle and Kant. Aristotle distinguished between *physei on*⁷ (what emerges from and itself) and *technê on* (what is brought forth or unconcealed by the artisan). Kant delimited phenomena in nature not against what is made, but against an ethical-practical realm. When Krebs suggests to name our discipline ‘ethics of nature’, she quietly implied that we all accept her definition of nature, which stands in the tradition of Aristotle. This is how she explained her dualistic position: “The term ‘nature’ stands ... for that part of the world which has not been made by humans, but which has emerged, is emerging, and is changing largely by itself: animals, plants, rocks, rivers, mountains, and planets. The counterpart of ‘nature’ ... is the notion of the artifact.” But if we reject such a dualistic ontology, then we must reject the name as well. The previous quote hints also at *the second reason* for the ambiguous character of Krebs’ name: The distinction between *physei on* (‘nature’ understood as what is being born, what develops from itself) and *technê on* (‘artifacts’) is by no means as clear-cut as it may seem. With the advancements of modern technology, and with modern man’s ability to alter the face of the planet he co-inhabits with so many other beings on a grand scale, the decision of what is ‘natural’ and what is an ‘artifact’ is becoming ever more difficult. Take, for example, genetically manipulated crops. Must we exclude these – and with them every likely and unlikely impact that they might have on the ‘nature’ around them – from our ethical deliberations because they are artifacts, according to our definition? And even if we did: It is now contested whether there is *any* landscape left that humans have not altered in one way or another (“wilderness”). Must we exclude all these areas that have been altered by man and man’s technology from ‘nature’, for according to our definitions they are artifacts? Why, the division between artifacts and nature is even creeping in on humans themselves: Must we see test-tube babies as artifacts and thereby exclude them from our ethical

⁷ This was later translated by the Latin term ‘natura’. The word nature is derived from the Latin ‘nasci’, which means ‘to be born’, ‘to develop’, ‘to emerge’.

questioning because they did not emerge from themselves, because their beginning was not fully ‘natural’?’

I paused and looked around me. No one made any move to speak. So I continued.

‘But we hesitate to accept these reservations. Stringent and rigorous though they may appear, these arguments comprise *something* that is hard to stomach. And although this *something* is not more than an unarticulated intuition to begin with, we may slowly begin to recognize the serious limitations that an ‘ethics of nature’ imposes on our entire discourse. As was the term ‘environmental ethics’, ‘ethics of nature’ too is discriminating in a way that would be unfortunate at the outset of *any form* of philosophical questioning, because it chops up the unity of the world into a strictly “human” and a strictly “natural” realm. Yet how can we willingly limit ourselves in this way and at the same time defend the principle that *any* conclusion we draw from *any* question we ask will have to be taken into consideration, and not only those that we may be fond of, and that make us feel secure?’

No one answered. I suggested therefore that we do not to speak of ‘ethics of nature’, either. Then I added:

‘Both the conventional name ‘environmental ethics’ and ‘ethics of nature’ uphold the same and most fundamental problem: They discriminate a purely *human* realm from a specific *other* realm. In one case, this external realm is called ‘environment’, in another, it is called ‘nature’. But the problem remains: Humans are defined outside of, and in opposition to, this realm. And all entailing arguments are dyed by this dualistic ontology.’

Both Gorke and v.d. Pfordten nodded in agreement. They suggested that our discipline be called ‘ecological ethics’. Neither elaborated much on their choice. But from the way Gorke phrased the central hypothesis of his work, I could deduce his motivation: “An ecological ethic which takes seriously the current knowledge about the place of humans in the cosmos, as well as the universal character of morals, cannot avoid abandoning the anthropocentric perspective and admitting inherent value also to the natural *Mitwelt*.” (1999:19;

own translation) In contrast to Krebs, Gorke used the term ‘nature’ not in a local way. To him, humans are included in nature: ‘Nature’ is *Mitwelt* to humans; humans are *with* in this world. Humans are *within* the world. And the term ‘ecological’ simply presented the most neutral alternative available. Throughout his work, Gorke cautioned our expedition against an ideological monopolizing of the scientific discipline ecology. Ecology *per se* cannot justify directly why we ought to do this or that. The role it *can* take, however, is to act as a “trailblazer of a change of attitude” (106; own translation) It was in this tentative and cautious way that Gorke spoke of ‘ecological ethics.’

Of course this debate did not find a neat solution. Yet after we all had spoken, I determined to side with v.d. Pfordten and Gorke and to speak of ‘ecological ethics’ henceforth. The name strengthens the role of ecology, and it successfully avoids the discriminating presuppositions of an ‘environmental’ ethics or an ‘ethics of nature’. But what secured my decision above all was the idea that an *eco*-logical ethics, understood in the most comprehensive way – remembering its semantic roots in the Greek word *oikos* –, is one which tries to get a clearer understanding of *what it means to be in our house, in our home*.

The way of power

Among those who were skeptical about the development of the discussion so far, Anna L. Peterson (2001) argued extensively that *first*, any idea of what it means to be human has ethical implications, and *second*, that all ethical systems lean upon an idea of what it means to be human. I agreed:

‘At the root of the project of the expanding circle lies a descriptive layer, one that shares a common idea of how humanness is to be understood. What all positions so far discussed share is that they are *expansive*. In its core, the moral circle – regardless of how much it is expanded – remains *human-centered*. This is a dualistic world view. It sees humans as the sole center of being. It subjects everything else to this center: *All the rest* becomes what can be so conveniently abridged – or should I rather say: segregated – by this Sword of Damocles known to us as ‘the environment’.’

Next, it was Val Plumwood's turn to speak. She attacked these expansive ethics for remaining bound by their dualistic world view. She said that it "does not really dispel speciesism, it just extends and disguises it" (2002:148). From its outset, expansive ethics had followed a path that Gorke called so fittingly the "way of power" (1999:254).

The main problem with the way of power had been firmly established at this stage of our journey: *The way of power is arbitrary*. Criteria for direct moral consideration are chosen arbitrarily and always from the standpoint of human judgment alone. Anthony Weston, who called expansive ethics *con-centric ethics* or, alternatively, uni-centrism, commented on this problem as follows:

Uni-centrism extends and disguises a kind of uni-lateralism in ethics as well. If there is but one circle of moral consideration with ourselves at the centre, it is natural to suppose that we can and perhaps must make moral decisions by our own lights. One kind of consideration remains, though perhaps operating over a wider sphere. One kind of actor—ourselves—remains essential and central, even if our deliberations must take account of more-than-human others as well. (2006:76)

I added to this: 'Another profound problem with the 'way of power' is that it is so inconspicuous. It is so quiet. It follows silently, and without causing a great stir, from the dualistic world view. This worked fine as long as our expedition remained *within* its own monolithic, con-centric structure. But after we have seen that the land we inhabit is but a small island in a vast ocean, and that our vision of the entire ocean is always bound by our own horizon, the dualistic world view and its con-centric way of power have become questionable.'

A very real quietness enwrapped the party momentarily. Eyes found one another. The fire cast dancing figures of rosy glow and pale darkness onto immobile faces. An owl hooted somewhere in the dark.

It was Weston who broke the silence: "We must resist the dynamic of assimilation and marginalization that ecofeminists identify so clearly, and thus recognize a world of multiple voices and beings that do not reduce to a single type and do not naturally fall into the orbit of one single sort of being's centre." (2006:74)

Competition of cooperation?

A turmoil ensued. Other approaches formed out of the criticism against concentric approaches. Quite obviously, these approaches also proliferated vastly and differed greatly with regard to specific lines of questioning and of reasoning.

I did not initially participate in the turmoil myself. I had again gotten sidetracked by what might have seemed like another marginal problem. To me, however, it held the essence of the discourse as such veiled within itself. The proceedings of this expedition so far – composed entirely of learned women and men at home in academia – had brought back to me words spoken by Arthur Evans:

Modern schools and universities push students into habits of depersonalized learning, alienation from nature and sexuality, obedience to hierarchy, fear of authority, self-objectification, *and chilling competitiveness*. These character traits are the essence of the twisted personality-type of modern industrialism. They are precisely the character traits needed to maintain a social system that is utterly out of touch with nature, sexuality, and real human needs.

(in: Jensen, Derrick. *Walking on Water*. p. 85. Emphasis mine.)

No matter how much I tried to silence Evans' words, they laid themselves over my hearing like a transparent coat of varnish hugs a newly painted log cabin. I listened to the discussion, but every comment was colored with the same tinge: competition. So I asked myself: *Is there perhaps another way to go? Is it possible to attempt something unheard-of, something quite brave within our discourse? Is it possible to c o m b i n e efforts of various approaches under a common header, a header that vanquishes open competition and instead makes these approaches collaborate critically?*

Thus the night wore away. Finally, as patches of dark orange were beginning to peel off the heavy shroud of darkness in the East, layer by layer by layer, I had formed an idea of how to unite the energies of a number of positions under a common header: *unifying holistic positions*. That was when I began to speak.

Part II. Unifying holistic positions

‘EVER SINCE WE ARRIVED UP HERE ON THE SUMMIT YESTERDAY, OUR DISCUSSION has been drawn in by the vast horizon around our vision. The horizon has made us ponder a number of ways in which to bring the con-centric project of ecological ethics to its most far-reaching conclusion, which we may call *holistic positions*. We have begun to speak of holistic positions when we mean to expand the moral circle to its outermost limits, *to include everything, or the whole of being*.

‘It was Bryan Norton (1987:177) among us who has subdivided these holistic positions into two opposing fields, *monistic* holism, and *pluralistic* holism. To *monistic* holism, only the system as a whole possesses direct ethical relevance. The value of individual parts arises solely from their relation to the greater system; their interest is subordinated to the functionality of the whole system. Eric Katz has marked himself as a representative of this position when he called individual interest a “secondary moral principle” (2003:91) to the interests of wholes. *Pluralistic* holism, on the other hand, reconciles monistic holism with strictly individualistic positions. To pluralistic holism, moral relevance is not *only* something possessed by individuals, but it is *also* something inherent in wholes as such. Both wholes and parts are loci or places of value for the pluralistic holist.

‘May I further make the suggestion that we give a new name to the group of pluralistic holism? I suggest calling this group *unifying holistic positions* from now on, or simply *unifying positions*.

‘You will ask, of course, why I find it necessary to use a different name than the one Norton has suggested.

‘Two interconnected reasons inspired this name. The first is a *theoretical* reason. Only unifying holistic positions can truly *unify* individual interest with its relationship to wholes, and only these positions are able to ask about the vibrant and ever-shifting *relationships* between us humans and our home, which now includes not only the island we have believed to constitute everything, but also

what lies beyond our horizon. The second is a *pragmatic* reason. Unifying holistic positions contain the dormant potential to *unite their forces* in the single-most important aspect that they share: the dynamic unity of being. The name ‘unifying holistic positions’ protects us against getting entangled in short-sighted battles where *competition* prevails and determines the course of our arguments. It hones our senses for the essence of all these positions: They *cooperate* on the level of their most fundamental premise.

‘In what follows, I will revisit three different positions. They all converge on the basic principle of the unity of being, yet still they all retain a critical distance to one another. A basic assumption that underlies the entire presentation I am about to unfold is that cooperation needs not exclude critical questioning. Critical cooperation, in other words, is not simply an opposing pole to competition. It is sooner a more considerate, more elegant, and more rigid way of arguing.

‘The three unifying positions I will talk about are Martin Gorke’s *holism*, Arne Næss’s *Ecosophy T*, and *multicentrism*. I personally share this third position with Anthony Weston.⁸

The radical chasm between concentricisms and unifying holistic positions

‘To speak to you about the way in which holism, Ecosophy T, and multicentrism can unite forces, I must first show you that *unifying positions contrast radically from the entire concentric project of ecological ethics*. All of us have overseen this radical divide until now. But the potency of unifying holistic positions lies just in this divide.

‘What is it that separates unifying holistic ethics most sharply from concentric ecological ethics? To answer this question, let us look at how the entirety of ecological ethics has been portrayed so far. Peter Singer’s image of the ‘expanding circle’ has invited some members of our expedition to render the

⁸ Let me add that my choice of terminology brings a minor risk with it: the first of the unifying positions I will discuss in the light of their joint cooperative power, the approach developed by Gorke, is simply called ‘holism’. This might be confusing alright, but, well, Gorke has simply chosen to call his position holism. ‘Holism’, by which I henceforth mean strictly the position of Gorke, is but one of three very different unifying holistic positions.

project of ecological ethics graphically⁹. In the chart I am about to draw in the sand for you, there is no divide between the concentric project and unifying holistic positions. What's more, unifying positions (remember, Norton has called them 'pluralistic holism') are merged with 'monistic holism' and simply called: holistic positions. This chart is the most common way to illustrate the project of our expedition:

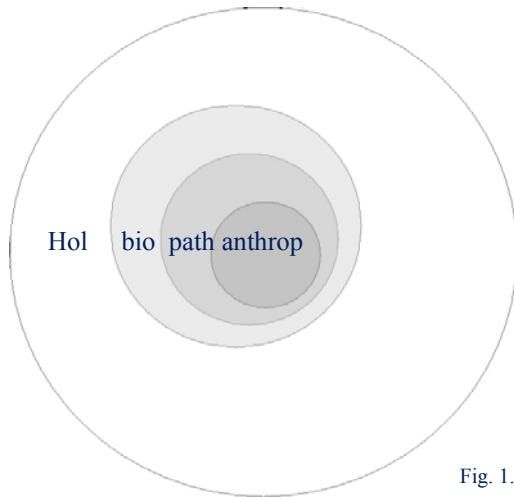


Fig. 1. The common way of illustrating ecological ethics

'So far, so good. This is common wisdom: Each of the spheres represents the respective circle of direct moral responsibility, with the innermost sphere limiting humans' direct moral responsibility to themselves, the next one *also* including all sentient beings, the next one *also* including all living beings. According to this depiction, unifying holistic positions would be those that argue for a direct moral responsibility for *all that is* (as, in fact, they do!). If seen exclusively in this way, the portrayal of unifying holistic positions as the outermost sphere is understandable, simple, and, why, correct.

'But it is unfortunate to display unifying holistic positions in this way. Even though they are being presented *correctly*, something is being lost. What is being lost is *the essence* of unifying holistic positions.

'The reason may be obvious by now. Still we must spell it out: Unifying holistic positions cannot be considered *within* the concentric paradigm. To do so clouds their most essential feature. *Unifying holistic positions reverse the burden of proof. They begin from all that is, rather than heading towards such an all-*

⁹ Cf. for example v.d. Pfordten (2000) or Gorke (1999).

embracing view. That is why they cannot be counted simply as the most far-reaching concentricism. Unifying holistic positions must be seen outside of that paradigm, and opposed to it. Therefore, let me suggest making the sharp and essential divide between the concentric project and unifying holistic positions as palpable as possible. We will draw two separate diagrams:

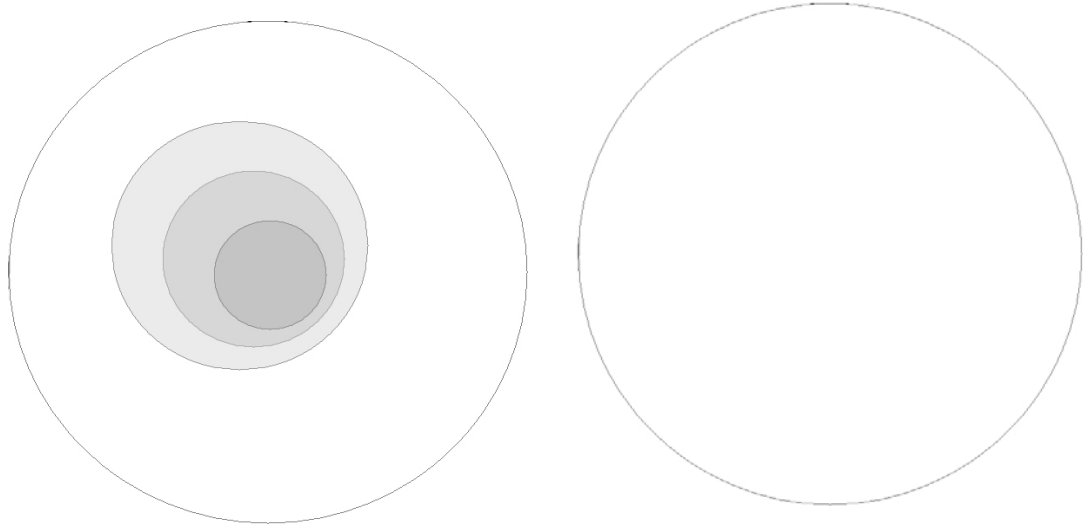


Fig. 2. Concentricisms vs. Unifying holistic positions

‘But, you may ask, is this not making a rather simple point unnecessarily complicated? What do we gain by displaying unifying positions separately, and outside the concentric paradigm? What we gain is a clearer view of the most important dividing feature between concentricisms and unifying holistic positions, a feature that cannot be seen in Fig. 1. What we gain is a lucid understanding that essentially, there is a chasm between unifying holistic positions on the one hand, and concentricisms on the other. We see more clearly than before that a cavernous breach is gaping throughout our discourse field, a breach torn by two incommensurable *world views*.

‘According to the *first* world view, humans still make up the sole center of being. It is from that center alone that direct moral responsibility towards the ‘environment’ is negotiated. The permissibility of evidence in favor of – or against – widening the moral circle towards such a perceived ‘environment’ is negotiated exclusively *within* that center, according to rules authorized by the single fact that they are derived *from* that center.

‘According to the *other* view of the world, such a single-centered perception of reality has become anachronistic, and with it, the very notion of ‘environment’ is crumbling. This other view of the world does not ask how much the moral circle can be *expanded*. It reverses the burden of proof: It begins by asking what reasons we have for *limiting* the moral community. In this, that second vision of the world reveals that the world-shattering breakthroughs of Copernicus and of Darwin have successfully sunken under its skin. It expresses that it has liberated itself from the ancient Western paradigm that humans are the sole center of the universe, or that man has been created to dominate all the rest of creation, respectively. This vision demonstrates that it has learned to embrace and to breathe the freedom bestowed on men when they finally shook off the unbearable burden of a reality that *is* only in relation to them. This vision is curious to see beyond the horizon of our island.

‘For this reason, the common way of illustrating our project (cf. Fig 1.) is inopportune. It carries along the imminent risk of being misinterpreted in the way that even unifying holistic positions retain humans as the center of being. But because such an interpretation runs counter to the common project of all unifying holistic positions, we had better made this as clear as we can. While *all* approaches to ecological ethics necessarily question the role of *humans*, and try to find answers regarding good *human* conduct, it is this difference in the world views, rather than the shift from individualistic to super-individualistic positions, that cuts the sharpest divide through the discourse field of ecological ethics.

‘In his overview over ecological ethics, Ott (2000:23) has verged upon that same chasm, although he has not drawn the same conclusions that we have now drawn. Ott admits that a number of dissenting approaches are incommensurate, and that they cannot possibly be united because their basic premises are just too different. He calls this an “unattractive consequence”, because ecological ethics in general claims to be a rigorous discipline.

‘This may be unattractive indeed. But what’s more, it seems to be an unavoidable consequence. If we draw these two observations together, then another question poses itself: Is *any* scientific undertaking actually possible

without being rooted in a particular world view? It is probably not. Therefore, ecological ethics will benefit greatly from carrying more torches into the faint realm of world views.¹⁰ Our move to unite three positions under a single header does just that.

‘It is time we lend our ears to each of the three unifying positions in turn, and to ask how they can come together to create a critical collaboration.’

Gorke’s holism

‘As we are well aware of by now, Gorke distances himself against centrism because their arguments have grown from an unarticulated and arbitrary way of power. And while all three of the following positions reverse the burden of proof, it is Gorke who articulates most overtly a philosophical argument for this reversal. Let us bear in mind that the other two positions, Ecosophy T and multi-centrism, do not depend on the soundness of Gorke’s argument for their own cause. It is not necessary that all accept the way he deduces the argument. The three positions may collaborate. But we remember: They collaborate critically.’

Reversing the burden of proof

‘Gorke’s reversal of the burden of proof rests on the notion of *altruism*. Altruism is, of course, a very ambiguous philosophical term. It is co-informed by other ambiguous words such as ‘selfhood’ or ‘otherness’¹¹. Gorke’s reversal of the burden of proof rests on one particular way of using the word. He writes: “Altruism [is] the willingness to sacrifice a superficial advantage in favor of nature or future generations, [driven by] free understanding and goodwill.” (1999:178; own translation). ‘Nature’ is a critical term here. As we discussed earlier, Gorke speaks of ‘nature’ not in a local way. ‘Nature’, for him, does not constitute an opposition to humans. It includes them. There are three reasons for this: *First*, social communities are not isolated, but they are embedded in open

¹⁰ Potthast (2000) develops an analogous proposition.

¹¹ Cf. Jon Wetlesen (2002) for a carefully worked-out discussion of different forms of altruism.

ecological communities. *Second*, humans and all other living beings together form a phylogenetic community. All life, in other words, has a common origin. *Third*, humans form a community of *being* with all that is (1999:248 ff.). With this in mind, we may be able to grasp Gorke's altruism a little better. Altruism, for Gorke, is an attitude we ourselves have – as biological beings with the capacity to reflect on our own actions, and to adapt our actions to these reflections – towards the rest of these various layers of the open community of being. This form of altruism becomes not so much a *definite dogma* that prescribes all actions for every conceivable situation. As we shall see shortly, it rather becomes a *point of reference* that helps us judge every actual situation anew through ongoing and open-ended exchanges.'

After this brief introduction I took a breath. Then I went on:

'Gorke arrives at this form of altruism through a look at *interhuman morals*. More specifically, Gorke discusses a formal analysis of the notion of 'morals' that Ernst Tugendhat (1994) has undertaken. According to Tugendhat, any person stands principally before an elemental choice between egoism on the one hand, and altruism on the other. Tugendhat's decisive point is that *if* a person chooses the path of altruism, then she *cannot* be selective as regards the scope of her altruistic stance. He says:

To the degree that it is you who determines whom of your fellow humans you will respect, and whom you won't, you would mold the circle of those who must be respected at your own discretion, from your egoistic perspective, from the standpoint of absolute power. Therefore, the alternative to egoism can only be: indiscriminate respect for anyone. (in: Gorke 1999:248; own translation)

'According to Tugendhat, you cannot *first* decide to be an altruist, and *then* decide whom your altruism will apply to, and whom it won't. Once you have chosen to be an altruist, you will have to be an *unconditional* altruist. For if you begin to choose whom you will respect, and whom you won't, you have fallen back onto the path of power again. Either you are an egoist. Or you are an unconditional altruist. For Tugendhat, there cannot be a middle ground.

‘This observation brings Tugendhat into close proximity with Immanuel Kant. His formal analysis of morals, which has uncovered the radical nature of altruism, must lead toward Kant’s Categorical Imperative.

‘Gorke accepts the radical nature of altruism. But he observes an inconsistency in Tugendhat’s further line of reasoning. For Tugendhat takes up his own observation of the radical nature of altruism to argue that (merely) all beings ‘who can cooperate’ must be included into the moral community (and hence no others).

‘Gorke distances himself from Tugendhat at this point, which means that he also distances himself from Kant. He points out that while both Kant and Tugendhat claim to be working out a mere *formal* analysis, their work is actually preceded by a decision as regards the *content* of the moral community. In the case of Kant, it includes only *rational beings*; in the case of Tugendhat it includes only *beings who can cooperate*. Yet these decisions are incompatible with the results of Tugendhat’s own analysis. If morals possess the *universal* character that Tugendhat says they do, on what grounds, then, can one justify limiting the moral circle to rational beings, or to beings who can cooperate alone? On no grounds, says Gorke. It is therefore that he argues that once we have accepted the universal character of altruism, our only tenable conclusion can be: *a holistic standpoint*. We cannot, in other words, decide to have an altruistic attitude towards humans and, perhaps, a number of higher animals, but have a not-so-altruistic attitude towards, say, plants, rivers, or entire species. Because as soon as we introduce some sort of gradation of altruism, we are actually – and principally – acting as egoists. If it is we who define the criteria for when to be altruistic and when not, we are not actually being altruistic at all.

‘This formal analysis of the *normative* layer is very closely coupled with the *descriptive* layer: There is no radical split between ourselves and the world. We inhabit a multilayered, shifting, and open community of being. And if we acknowledge this close connection, then it becomes impossible to set up any single definite line around our morals. The universal character of morals,

especially seen in light of the latest ecological knowledge, would necessarily have to lead to a holistic moral standpoint (1999:248 ff.).

‘To reconcile his view with the analysis of Tugendhat, Gorke develops a broadened form of Kant’s Categorical Imperative: “Act in such a way that you treat all being always at the same time as an end, and never merely as a means.” (Ibid. 250; own translation) This expansion sets up the crucial point of holism: the reversal of the burden of proof. In dissolving the dualism means vs. ends, holism regards nothing *only* as a means for others, but rather acknowledges that everything *also* exists in itself, and for itself. For this reason, everything must in principle be regarded as a moral object. From the holistic standpoint, one no longer has to argue why this or that *should* be protected against invasion, unnecessary change, or destruction. The moral standpoint – the renunciation of egoism in favor of unconditional altruism – entails that one has to argue instead why this or that *should not* be regarded morally.

A problem and its possible remedy

‘As Gorke indicates towards the end of his book, a crucial problem of holism lies in the fact that the decision in favor of the moral standpoint – which we now know means unconditional altruism – cannot be derived from a normative obligation (‘I ought to’). The only path that will lead to the attitude of altruism sets out from personal engagement (‘I want to’). A person who does not recognize the meaning in adjusting their behavior towards the wants and needs of others cannot be forced onto the altruistic path.

What enhances the problem still is the fact that holism brings with it an unforeseeable array of moral conflicts. Such conflicts are, according to Gorke, nothing else than stronger or weaker forms of *guilt*. We simply cannot be altruistic *all the time*. Any action we engage in – even something as simple as walking along a sandy trail – piles guilt onto our shoulders. Occupied as we might be by swaying poppies, we do not notice how our feet crush some busy ants underneath their enormous weight. A tiny fly might accidentally come so close to our mouth that as we take a deep breath, the creature is sucked deep into

our lungs and killed in an instant. When we pick some sorrel blades to taste their sour freshness, a plant dies. It is a simple fact: In living, we impair others. Because of that simple fact, altruism cannot be a definite dogma. Because of that fact, altruism can be no more than a point of reference. It can be no more than an ideal that educates us to be more alert, and to accept responsibility for our own actions. But again, altruism can only *become* a point of reference when we decide that we *want* it to be. This is a pragmatic problem, most of all. So if we wish to face it, we must look for pragmatic remedies.

‘Schurz has pointed out rightly that the possibility of personal engagement, and of direct experience, plays a central role in the emotional anchoring of moral values, and therefore in energizing motivational potentials. According to him, most people need “... a direct mental-emotional underpinning of ecological values, given that their ecological conscience shall become effective in practice.” (in: Gorke 1999:181; own translation)

‘Schurz’s idea is hardly surprising, but its momentous implications are disquieting indeed. They help us realize that almost without our noticing, *an uncanny silence has been throbbing throughout the discourse of ecological ethics*: the silence of others. But have not those others been here all along alright? Have they not been there in such notions as ‘the environment’ or ‘nature’? That may be so – but let me ask you: *How* have they been there?’

I looked around me. No one spoke. After some time I continued:

‘Throughout the dominating part of our discourse, others have been nearly entirely muted, stacked onto one another in neat piles, packed away in boxes that may not have permitted us to *hear* them, let alone to *listen to* them. But they did allow us to keep them in check, observable from the corner of our eyes, quantifiable for easy access and undemanding processing. Despite the simple and quite obvious fact that each of us is amidst others at all times (*now and now and now*), the discourse has made the appearance of looking at what is immediately there through a telescope – but the wrong way round. We have labeled others into very few and very general categories. This way, we have severed others artificially from their immediacy, and encapsulated them in the diameter of a

very limited set of lenses. However, if we were to take Schurz's comment to heart – and we do – then this *severity* has to cause us to muse over this silence. If personal engagement and direct experience do play the central role in the healing of emotional estrangement that Schurz suggests, then it is startling that we have given the subject so little attention in our discourse so far.'

Still no one spoke. I took it as an invitation to pursue.

'Holism merely points towards this problem, but it does not give us any clues for how to tackle it. The *second* unifying holistic position, Arne Næss's Ecosophy T, attempts to give greater attention to the problem. The question we will keep in mind is this: Are others being made *sufficiently audible* in Næss's position?

Ecosophy T

'Even more explicitly than Gorke, Næss frequently emphasizes the importance and interrelatedness of both individual and holistic thinking. In this, he stands firm in a Norwegian tradition that dates back at least as far as the eighteenth and nineteenth century-philosopher Niels Treschow¹². But let us be careful when we draw Næss into the group of unifying holistic positions. For Næss himself shies away from any kind of definite tagging. He does not speak of wholes or holism, but rather of "lower- and higher-order gestalts". Gestalt-thinking, says Næss, "induces people to think more strenuously about the relations between wholes and parts." (Næss 1989:58) This said, we may continue to speak of Næss's philosophy as a unifying holistic position, but with a sharpened sensitivity. Let us think of the name 'unifying holistic positions' only as a *tentative variant*, not as a definite finale. It is the name of a prospecting course; it is a formula which may assist us in sketching out an alternative to the concentric project. But it is no more than that. Næss teaches us that all formulae carry a certain slumbering danger within them, and that we must always be on our guard when we confront them. We can learn from Næss to always be skeptical in the face of our own

¹² cf. Witoszek 1999:459 ff.

conclusions. Let us bear this thought in mind, inconspicuous though it may still be at this point.’

I sought eye contact with Arne Næss, who was fidgeting on his knees vis-à-vis to where I sat. The mischievous grin he gave me urged me to go on:

‘Næss is considered to be the father of deep ecology. However, our interest here shall lie merely in what Næss has come to call Ecosophy T, his personal philosophical underpinning of deep ecology proper¹³. This said, I must qualify further that I will commence this critique of Ecosophy T by looking briefly at the article “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary“ (Næss 1973/1999). Not only was this article destined to become the founding paper of the deep ecology movement. It also presents Næss’s first direct reaction to the ecological crisis, and as such it is the earliest indication of where he was to head subsequently. The article is important for Ecosophy T in that it contains at least three elemental theoretical ideas that Næss later transcribed over to Ecosophy T. The first two of those can be found in points one and two of the seven points which Næss listed to contrast a ‘deep ecology movement’ from a ‘shallow ecology movement’. Point one reads:

Rejection of the man-in-environment image in favor of *the relational, total-field image*. Organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations. An intrinsic relation between two things A and B is such that the relation belongs to the definitions or basic constitutions of A and B, so that without the relation, A and B are no longer the same thing. The total-field model dissolves not only the man-in-environment concept, but every compact thing-in-milieu concept – except when talking at a superficial or preliminary level of communication. (Ibid.:3)

‘In this founding statement Næss invigorates the “total-field image”, which may be understood primarily as a fundamental ontological statement. As such it can hardly be limited only to the “biospherical net”. Hence, the “field of intrinsic relations” is much less a direct *synonym* of this biospherical net than rather its *hyperonym*, preceding and including it. This ontological base has been refined and transported into Ecosophy T as the concept of the ‘greater Self’. Point two reads:

¹³ The literature is frequently incoherent as regards what constitutes deep ecology as a *movement*, and how Næss’s own philosophy, *Ecosophy T*, fits into that. For a further discussion of the issue, cf. Glasser (1995), Seiler (2000), and Mueller (2006 b).

Biospherical egalitarianism in principle. The ‘in principle’ clause is inserted because any realistic praxis necessitates some killing, exploitation, and suppression. The ecological field worker acquires a deep-seated respect, or even veneration, for ways and forms of life¹⁴. He reaches an understanding from within, a kind of understanding that others reserve for fellow men and for a narrow section of ways and forms of life. To the ecological field-worker, *the equal right to live and blossom* is an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom. Its restriction to humans is an anthropocentrism with detrimental effects upon the life quality of humans themselves. The quality depends in part upon the deep pleasure and satisfaction we receive from close partnership with other forms of life. The attempt to ignore our dependence and to establish a master-slave role has contributed to the alienation of man from himself. (Ibid.:4)

‘This point represents the first instance of Næss’s observation that man has become ‘alienated’ from himself. It forms the background against which Ecosophy T’s principle of ‘identification’ was developed¹⁵. Without a preceding *alienation*, the necessity of a subsequent *identification* would be incomprehensible and superfluous.

‘The third elemental idea of this article is Næss’s coining of the term ‘ecosophy’. Originally, this term simply denoted “a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium” (Ibid.:6). This meaning has been expanded considerably since. Ecosophy T – representative of all other actual and possible ecosophies – presents a *total view* which combines philosophical reasoning with action. The idea behind calling it a total view is that people should be made aware not only that philosophical questioning in the face of the ecological crisis cannot be an end in itself, but also that people always act as if they were following systematic structures, even though “a total view cannot be completely articulated by any person or group” (1989:38). Yet despite this irresolvable difficulty, the *attempt* to articulate one’s own total view in a more comprehensive and coherent way is never futile. Quite the opposite, Næss argues: It is actually demanded of us. For “as humans, we are responsible in our actions as to motivations and premises relative to any question that can be asked of us.” (Ibid.) That is why, in his exposition of Ecosophy T, Næss is not so much interested in delivering a fully coherent philosophical framework that may hold against all assaults, as he is in encouraging others “to try to articulate the necessary parts of fragments of his or

¹⁴ The similarity of expression may hint at an indirect influence by Schweitzer, although no reference is given.

¹⁵ ‘Identification’ is also a term referred to by Sigmund Freud (in: Einstein & Freud 1932/2005 p. 42), the works of whom Næss was familiar with due to his own study period in Vienna during the 1930s. Whether there are any connections between the two, Næss has, to my knowledge, not mentioned.

her own implicit views, in the hope that it will lead to clarification of the difficult process of facing and responding to the challenges of life in our ecosphere.” (Ibid. 1989:38).¹⁶ Næss carries on the tradition first introduced by Socrates, who provoked his disciples to go on questioning their own views until they could express themselves more clearly on the most fundamental issues.

‘Let me make it clear beyond doubt that during the criticism I am about to raise against Ecosophy T, I take its personal character to heart. My criticism cannot leave the standpoint of the observer, and it can therefore not truly penetrate Ecosophy T. In fact, it does not even intend to do so. Its aim is more humble: To pick up a point which *can* be interpreted as a weak point, and which *can* provoke further questioning of others, questioning which will lead away from Ecosophy T. In this, it is just the form of criticism that Næss invites each of us to pursue. It is the kind of criticism that grows from viewing unifying holistic positions as a collaborative project.’

I looked over at him again. Still his merry grin drew long and undulating curves across his face. But behind these there was another expression now. Was it a tinge of excitement?

‘Næss developed Ecosophy T as a system of norms and hypotheses. The one ultimate norm from which all ensuing ones are derived is “Self-realization!”. The ‘Self’ (with a capital S) has a large and comprehensive meaning, embracing the entirety of life¹⁷. It stands in opposition to the much narrower ‘self’, by which is meant the individual ‘ego’. The exclamation mark, together with the active use of the word ‘realize’, hint at the open-ended process-character of ‘Self-realization!’. It is a process headed toward “maximizing the manifestations of life” (Ibid. 1986/2003:272), where each narrow ‘self’ gradually attains higher and higher levels of Self-realization.¹⁸ In a systematic adaptation, Næss puts it as follows:

¹⁶ For further comments cf. also Rothenberg 1986, in: Næss 1989:7 ff.; Seiler 2000:153 f.

¹⁷ Which, as I will discuss in Chapter Two, in itself is a large, comprehensive, and rich word.

¹⁸ Whether or not we can call Næss an altruist, is surely – again – a matter of how we understand altruism. Perhaps we can find a good clue in Wetlesen’s (2002) discussion of different forms of altruism, even though he does not refer to Næss directly. Wetlesen proposes to call such a (Næssian) transcendence of the ego and the alter: *generosity*. This does, indeed, seem to be a fitting term for Næss.

- N1: Self-realisation!
- H1: The higher the Self-realisation attained by anyone, the broader and deeper the identification with others.
- H2: The higher the level of Self-realisation attained by anyone, the more its further increase depends upon the Self-realisation of others.
- H3: Complete Self-realisation of anyone depends on that of all
- N2: Self-realisation for all living beings! (Ibid. 1989:197 f.)

‘From the ultimate norm are derived three hypotheses, which together lead to a slightly more precise second norm. The derivation of N2 through the hypotheses qualifying N1 is called *loose derivation*. This means that not all premises leading from one to another are actually articulated. ‘Loose’ here means that more precise norms and hypotheses do not derive *directly* from more basic premises. They also depend on additional norms and hypotheses, each of which is more particular than the preceding ones.

‘Næss calls all formulations at this ultimate level of his ecosophy T₀-formulations, which means they are expressed at the lowest level of preciseness, and that they allow for many parallel interpretations at higher levels. ‘Self-realization!’ is one such formulation. Another one that appears for the first time in H1 is ‘identification’¹⁹. Although the semantic vagueness of these terms is intended, they also leave ample room for diverging interpretations. They do so especially because semantically spacious concepts are interrelated through *loose derivation*.

‘Let us look at how Næss illustrates the T₀-formulation ‘identification’: “Increased self-identity involves increased identification with others.” In turn, “we increasingly see ourselves in other beings, and others see themselves in us.” This is how “the self is extended and deepened as a natural process of the realization of its potentialities in others.” (1986/2003:272) While Næss intentionally omits greater specification, saying this would be “of greater interest to the logician than to the ecosopher” (Ibid. 1989:198), I disagree in this particular point. The reason is that this designation of ‘identification’ creates an *epistemological* problem: *identification* presupposes *alienation*. Although the term ‘self’ is used to denote *every* center of forces (‘gestalts’), it seems

¹⁹ This term has since flourished throughout the deep-ecology literature (i.e., Fox 2003; Rothenberg 1995; Sale 1999), and often quite disconnected from its origin in Ecosophy T.

reasonably justified to say that alienation is a purely *human* phenomenon. Næss himself has said this, actually. It is only humans who need to (re)identify with other selves (*including* but also *transcending* humans), as no other forms of life have become alienated to begin with. Owing to the vagueness of the term, we cannot say that Næss is being logically incoherent. We can say, however, that Næss's vagueness confuses two distinctive concepts of 'others' too hurriedly. The narrow concept considers only *other humans*. The broader one considers *all centers of force*, or *gestalts* (other than the ego). Weston has shown that he finds such blending of sameness and otherness troublesome:

The suggestion is that what we have in common, even with tigers and trees and probably even with rocks and bacteria, is more important than that which divides us. And there are surely commonalities to be found, 'identifications' that, apart from this procedure, we would no doubt overlook. The implicit monism, though—arranging our argument so that the commonalities alone ground the ethic—is more troublesome. (2006:72)

Similarly, Plumwood agrees with the view that Næss leaves the problem of sameness and otherness insufficiently addressed. She argues that “the idea of the extended self in deep ecology suggests that the whole world becomes a kind of extended individual ego incorporating everything that is. It thus fails to acknowledge in any real sense the ‘otherness’ of what is in the world; since everything is viewed as being part of oneself, there is no space for difference.” (in: Palmer 2003:31). On another occasion, Plumwood (1999:210) has commented on the same problem: “We need a concept of the other as interconnected with the self, but as a separate being in their own right, accepting the ‘uncontrollable, tenaciousness otherness’ of the world as a condition of freedom and identity for both self and other.”

As I looked into the faces of my fellow travel companions, I suddenly realized that it would be unjust to end my discussion of Ecosophy T on this rather rigid critical note, regardless its significance for the further development of my exposition. Because as it stood, it would have failed to acknowledge the continuing importance that Næss plays for our discourse. So I added:

‘A quarter of a century after Aldo Leopold understood that the (then not yet fully recognized) ecological crisis cannot only be fought through a change of action, but that it must also be addressed through a change of attitude, Næss came to the same conclusion. Both share this view with Martin Heidegger, who understands the *crisis* that we are in the midst of in the way ‘crisis’ was understood in ancient Greek. *Krisis* denoted a ‘judgment’, a ‘deciding’, or a ‘sentence’. For Heidegger, the judgment humans are faced with is our very *relationship* to the earth. Furthermore, the term ‘ethics’ is related to ‘ethos’, both of which are also derived from Greek (ethos), meaning ‘character’ or ‘manners’. What does this imply? That the full range of ethics cannot be limited to a ‘rational’ discourse whose aim it is to filter out tenable normative statements, prescribing what the ‘right’ moral actions are²⁰. Rather, ethics transcends a purely normative realm to include questions such as: What does our being-in-the-world mean to us? What stirs us, what makes us act the way we do? The insight that the ecological *krisis* demands of us to ask ourselves who we wish to be, entails also to ask what character, what manners we wish to develop to deal with this *krisis*. In order to ask who we wish to be, we must also ask: Who are we? That implies the question: Who are we not? Which in turn means that we ask about the *relationships* into which we constantly interweave, and which our being-in-the-world is co-constitutive of. It is mostly in this latter connection that the works of Næss have contributed most strongly to ecological ethics, and that they present both a challenge and a vivid source of inspiration to our ongoing discourse. Næss has been teaching and also living a profoundly positive and activating outlook and life, and on humans’ relationship with others.’

At long last, Næss himself seized the opportunity to whisper:

“The meaningfulness inherent in even the tiniest living beings makes the amateur naturalist quiver with emotion. There is no communication: the ‘things’ express, talk, proclaim – without words. Within a few yards from the gnarled wooden walls of the cottage Tvergastein there are rich and diverse changing worlds big enough to be entirely unsurveyable“ (in: Seiler 2000:176)

²⁰ Seiler (2000:177) remarks that all rationality is fundamentally shaped by particular world views and self-understandings.

Multicentrism

This brings me to the final missing link of my recollection, and to the decisive deliberations that led to my embarking. I continued:

‘Multicentrism as the *third* alternative to the dominating concentricisms developed most recently among the unifying holistic positions. But it is hardly fair to speak of multicentrism as a single position.’

My companions looked up. What could I have meant by that?

‘Early in 2006, after undertaking a critical study of Næss’s Ecosophy T and Peter Reed’s ecosophy Man Apart, I coined the term ‘multicentrism’ for a future philosophy that would take into account both sameness and otherness, and that would have freed itself from the dominating concentric paradigm of ecological ethics (cf. Mueller 2006 a). I then called multicentrism my ‘personal ecosophy’, my own attempt to take a stance towards the judgments of our times. I was unaware at the time that Anthony Weston had published the article “Multicentrism. A Manifesto” some two years prior in the journal *Environmental Ethics* (No. 26/2004), coming to strikingly similar conclusions, and further underlying the importance of this novel perspective on the problem. In this manifesto Weston draws on a large variety of authors that do not use the name ‘multicentrism’ themselves for their work, but that nevertheless contribute to developing just that: multicentrism. Hence, when I speak of multicentrism as a single position here, I do so knowing that its boundaries are difficult to delineate. Once again, it will be helpful if we all bear in mind that what I call multicentrism is above all the attempt to cast a different and more nuanced light at the contested field of world views. Multicentrism as an explicit position is still too young to be able to offer much more than that.

‘You may ask, of course, why multicentrism is even important when *all that is* has already been included in the moral circle by Gorke’s holism. Does not holism render multicentrism redundant?’

‘That I have resolved to strengthen multicentrism even so, is largely inspired by *pragmatic deliberations*. Earlier I mentioned the problem of motivation. The adoption of the altruistic standpoint, which according to Gorke

leads inevitably to the holistic standpoint, must be preceded by a deliberate ‘I want’. This thought leads us to consider more closely the roles of personal engagement and direct experience. It is here that multicentrism may help set us in motion to open doors, gates, and windows on all sides, and to let a fresh breeze inside. What also keeps me from halting already is the thought that more voices can prevent a discourse from receding into a static state. Various positions can refine one another through the open-ended friction they generate. They will keep each other attentive to imminent methodological inconsistencies, and they will be able to hone the similarities they share. All this cannot only strengthen each position in itself. It can also consolidate their combined, polyphonic voice in this critical process of judgment that our home is faced with at the moment.

‘At this point, a further reservation has become overdue. So far I have spoken of ‘multicentrism’ without going much into detail about what this position actually entails. Yet even so, what ought to have become clear already is that multicentrism stands in stark contrast not only to all concentricisms, but also to holism as developed by Gorke. Therefore, the graphic depiction of Fig. 2, which claimed to contrast concentricisms sharply from unifying holistic positions (including multicentrism), must be amended. While that graphic depiction was useful above to help develop the deep chasm between *all* concentricisms on the one hand, and *all* unifying holistic positions on the other, it is no longer acceptable that we subsume multicentrism under Fig. 2. We must distinguish more closely between holism, for which Fig. 2.2 continues to be a suitable illustration, and multicentrism. Have a look at the following image. It is a rough graphic portrayal of multicentrism.²¹

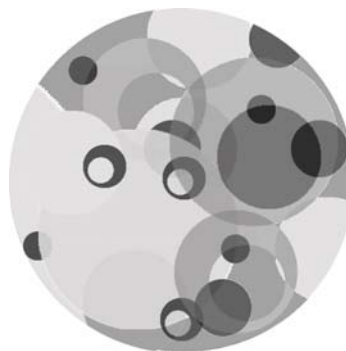


Fig.. 3 *Multicentrism*

²¹ One may ask of course where in this the third holistic position, Ecosophy T, finds its proper place. I deem it best to leave the question open, and I do so bearing in mind the thought that introduced the exposition of Ecosophy T – it continues to defy all classification.

‘All the graphic depictions we are pondering this morning are best considered with a watchful eye, and with reasonable and skeptical detachment, for they entail some serious curbs. Their use is very local, in that they enhance the legibility of the various approaches to ecological ethics by drawing them together to their essential components, and by showing how the approaches can be grouped. But especially with regards to holism and multicentrism (cf. Fig. 2 & 3), one cannot but notice that the *neat line* which convenience must draw around the shared intuition of all unifying holistic positions – that of ‘unified being’ – is contradictory to their agenda. It would be more accurate, or rather less misleading, *not* to draw that line. Yet if nothing else, one would at length run into the neat and rectangular margin of the paper, a boundary which is in no way less unfortunate; and gluing more paper onto either side of this one would only postpone the inevitable. Thus, although my depiction of ‘unified being’ as an unbroken circle offers itself as the *least disadvantageous* alternative available, we must caution ourselves of its function as an abstracting tool; and as such, we must become and remain cautious of its drawbacks. As regards multicentrism, you may notice that not only is the outer margin a disadvantage of our graphic rendition, but also its *two-dimensionality* is at best regrettable. Though it might succeed to satisfy the theorists among us whose interest reaches merely out toward forming a detached, hypothetical ‘notion’ of ‘the multicentric approach’ (“I see where this is going!”), multicentrism itself can hardly be *contained* in this way. If anything, multicentrism takes this depiction as a stepping stone. But we can illustrate multicentrism in a much simpler and more auspicious way. Let me recall the morning of the day we first set out on our expedition.

‘I had just awoken. I set the kettle on the iron oven, then went outside to leave the confines of the cabin in which I had been so comfortably sheltered from the creeping late-autumn chill. I went to stick my nose into the wind, and to see what weather this first day of the trip would bring.

‘At first there were the cars. So few cars frequented this back road that my ears could make out each of them distinctly, despite my inability to see them through the thick shrubs that line the edge of the brook between the cabin and the

road. Now a cargo truck, laden with heaviness, was laboring up the small hill. Now two smaller cars were whooshing round the bend in close succession. Now I sensed that distant tickle through my soles. The hourly bus was approaching. From the way the bus was slowing down carefully before the curve, I inferred that the bus was steered by that ever-weary driver with hair white as flour. The usual array of a handful of smaller children was likely to be scattered throughout the large vehicle, looking sleepily out the large glass windows. Now the bus had passed, leaving silence. But silence? Had there not been a raven's muffled croaking all along? Yes! He carried on imperviously, unseen behind a host of shadowy spruces. And there was more. As my ears were tuning in to what had merely been silence a moment earlier, they became aware of the multitude of layers of voices around them. From above, the high-pitched, jolly twitter of a nameless songbird spilled through heavy banks of clouds. In the east, somewhere beyond the dark forest line, a buck was barking with that unmistakable, throaty voice. An annoyed dog answered him from the far south. How far sounds could carry on such sober mornings! There was more still. The chill on my cheeks brought tidings that winter was skulking in from the high north. The smell of burning wood was fondling my nose, whispering that the neighbor had awoken. The dim, yellow lamp in the kitchen window of the farm house nearby was telling a story of warmth, and of breakfast. Two deer were grazing by the large red barn. It was the doe with her tiny fawn. Both had been insatiable for weeks on end, so utterly engrossed by their gnawing that they often made only reluctant attempts at flight. Their white tails shone like two stray lights, forgotten and left behind after a nocturnal lantern procession. At last, a rare visitor came scampering into the open. The red fox, oblivious to everything but the trace of a *smell*. His nose submerged amongst leaves worn down by heavy morning dew, amongst clover and dandelion, he scurried onwards through the meadow, sniffing, sniffing.

‘I see it on your faces, dear companions: “What has all this got to do with multicentrism,” you ask. It is simple. Was not that white-haired bus driver a center in himself? Each of the children on the bus, were they not centers in

themselves? Centers that experienced this world through pairs of small blinking eyes and through breathing bodies? Or the raven. Was he not fully absorbed in the center of his ravenworld when he browsed through the compost by the shed in search of something edible? Might not his world have contracted entirely into the discovery of that half-shriveled carrot, at last undug from the heap of leftovers? And will not the center of the doe's world have been filled to the rim with concern for her fawn, and did she not subdue her own urgent impulse to flee until the fawn had safely leapt into the sheltering bushes? Is it not the case that "[e]ach of a thousand human and more-than-human presences organizes a certain part of the world around itself, forms a distinctive local pattern, a certain organic completeness and cohesion" (Weston 2006:74)? And, finally, is not the attempt to *contain* all this, and more, in a two-dimensional illustration a very poor contraction indeed?'

Unity and otherness

'On the highest level of abstraction, multicentrism shares with the rest of the unifying holistic positions aspect of 'unity'. What it addresses more explicitly and more openly than has been done previously, is the 'otherness'-aspect. In his *Manifesto*, Weston said that multicentrism "envisions a world of irreducibly diverse and multiple centres of being and value—not one single circle, of whatever size or growth rate, but many circles, partially overlapping, each with its own centre." (2006:69) In this, multicentrism relates closely to what Næss calls the 'relational, total-field image'. However, Næss went on to develop his metaphysical interpretation of this relational total field, the 'greater Self'. If we trace Ecosophy T back to its original beginning from the relational total field, then we find a multicentric interpretation of Næss's thought rather straightforward. We can see it clearly through multicentric glasses. It is not until Ecosophy T is further developed around the gravitational field of the 'greater Self' that those glasses will be somewhat stained. Here, Ecosophy T shows a rather low level of metaphysical prudence. Multicentrism, in its current tentative state, is more sparing with metaphysical interpretations. One needs not speak of a

‘greater Self’ to invigorate a *relational, total-field image*. In dropping the ‘Self’, one is spared the problematic concept of ‘identification with other selves’, again in favor of scrutinizing the less laden notion of the *relationality* of being – and all its multifaceted implications. From this relational unity, one may then set out to explore both sameness and otherness. Weston sums this up as follows:

[Multicentrism is a] vision according to which more-than-human others enter the moral realm on their own terms, rather than by expansion from a single centre—a vision according to which there are diverse centres, shifting and overlapping but still each with its own distinctive starting-point. For a multi-centred ethic, then, the growth of moral sensitivity and consideration does not proceed through an expanding series of con-centric realms, each neatly assimilating or incorporating the previous stage within a larger and more inclusive whole. No: instead we discover a world of separate though mutually implicated centres. Moral growth consists in experiencing more and more deeply the texture of multiplicity in the world, not in tracing the wider and wider circles set off from one single centre. (2006:70)

‘In the *Manifesto*, Weston has summarized the multicentric project in these four broad themes: (1) decentering the human; (2) a diversity of centers; (3) the multiverse calls forth etiquette; and (4) ethics as a co-constituted process.

‘The *first* point has been largely charted by now. It says that any form of uni-centrism is rejected. By opening ourselves to the stories that others have to tell – which are “not to be measured by man” – we may “honour our distinctiveness as essential to our particular mode of being and (in part) to what we take to be our consequent moral standing”. Yet in doing so, we need not “impose ourselves as models for everyone and everything else’s being and standing.” (2006:73)

‘The *second* point takes this decentering one level up and places it into a larger context. As such, it is an extension of my anecdotal illustration of multicentrism from above. Weston: “Around us are not merely a multitude of humans or of conscious centres, and not merely a multitude of other midsized and discrete “force-fields” like rocks and trees, but a multitude of other kinds of “force-fields”—rhizomes, tectonic plates, bacteria, nebulae—at many different levels of organization too, from species and ecosystems to individual cells.” (2006:75)

‘The *third* point refers to that strategy which, as I mentioned in the beginning, is constitutive of all unifying holistic positions, even though not all

mention it explicitly: the *reversal of the burden of proof*. The so-called ‘demarcation problem’ – the problem of who should be acknowledged into the moral community – no longer poses itself as such. Others are, so-to-speak, innocent until proven otherwise. They are inherently valuable *to begin with*, and if anyone disagrees, the burden of proof lies with them.

‘Finally, also the *fourth* point is one that multicentrism shares with holism and Ecosophy T. Ethics is not understood in its narrow sense as a “normative critique and justification of morals and of rights, insofar as they concern action toward the nonhuman nature.” (cf. v.d. Pfordten). With the words of feminist philosopher Margaret Walker, ethics is rather understood much more comprehensively as “a collection of perceptive, imaginative, appreciative, and expressive skills and capacities which put us and keep us in contact with the realities of ourselves and specific others.” (1989:21). Underlying this view of ethics is a meta-ethical assessment that rejects viewing ethics as a formalistic discipline unmoved by contexts, seeking normative prescriptions for all possible or probable dilemmas. Wilhelm Vossenkuhl shares this view: “Seeing the things through the hierarchical structure of the commandments and obligations does not only weaken the powers of moral discernment, but it also creates a deceptive security in the act of judging itself.” (1993:145; own translation)

‘Ethics seen in the broader sense does not claim to give succinct normative prescriptions, but it challenges every actor to assess every situation anew, again and again. It challenges each of us to acknowledge others in their self-centeredness. It challenges us to “work things out together” (Weston 2006:77). In this, ethics is by no means only an (academic) discipline of a privileged crowd that scampers up and down the mountain of the human island. It is also – perhaps even predominantly – a *communicative practice*. Ethics seen in this way is a driving force, much in the way in which Schweitzer has described his own ethics, the Reverence for Life, with the beautiful words: “As the screw that burrows through the waters propels the ship, so the Reverence for Life propels the human creature.” (2003:38; own translation).

‘At long last, multicentrism creates opportunities for others to re-emerge from their silences. It opens up spaces for unforeseen encounters; it yields dialogue; it invites others to enter into mutual exchanges through open-ended negotiation and intricate attentiveness. Rather than scrambling dangerously close to the pitfalls of dogmatism, multicentrism, as Ecosophy T and holism, dares to endure the inspiring voids of skepticism.’

I exhaled. I was finished. I had expressed to them why it is possible to unite the forces of holism, Ecosophy T, and multicentrism in critical collaboration.

This novel angle took time to settle. So we called it a day.



IT DID NOT TAKE LONG TO EXTINGUISH THE FIRE AND TO GATHER OUR SPARSE belongings. Even so it was midday before we were ready to set out for the long march back down.

The little girl

Long after the sun had set that evening, our trek came down the mountain again. Everyone was still engaged in lively discussion when we entered the outskirts of the first human settlement. Suddenly we halted. A child stood on the path before us. It was a little girl; she was perhaps twelve or thirteen. She looked at each of us intensely. Then she spoke:

‘The world is very sick. What is it that you are doing to heal it?’

I looked at my fellow holistic thinkers around me. They nodded. So I went to the girl, kneeled in front of her, and spoke:

‘Some of us have come to agree that thought patterns of separation are making our Earth sick. So we are trying to undo them. But this is not easy, because even in our own discipline – philosophy – a world view is quietly at work that continues to separate us humans from the Earth. This world view continues to believe that we humans are the center of all being.’

Her eyes had me fixed. In a matter-of-fact voice she said:

‘That’s silly.’

Still she looked at me. As the moments passed, I noticed that she did not blink. Then I added:

‘What we are trying to do is to understand actions of destruction for what they are, and to replace them by acts of healing. And this means, first of all: to remember that ‘to heal’ originally means ‘to make whole again’. To heal means, in other words, to try to overcome separation.’

At that moment a decision came to me. I closed my eyes and thought: What better way to overcome separation than to throw myself into the world? What better way to start than trying to see what lies beyond our horizon?

When I reopened my eyes, the little girl no longer stood there in front of us. I looked around, perplexed. Ah, there she was! Skipping up the trail behind us, her hair caught momentarily by a breeze, it sounded as if she was – indeed – giggling.

The journey ahead

It is time to move on. But before we do, let us tie together the loose ends of this long chapter and ask what we are taking with us on the journey ahead.

Dietmar v.d. Pfordten identified the point of greatest abstraction in ethics, its point of departure, as being “the relationship between the acting human being and others who restrain his actions and decisions through normative obligations...” (2000:43; own translation). From this point of view, ethics is an analysis of the relationship between “Actor” and “Other” (Ibid.). Can we now unite this point of greatest abstraction with two additional aspects of ethics that we introduced earlier in the chapter? In the beginning, we presented ecological ethics as an *interdisciplinary project* that touches on ecological, socio-psychological, political, and ontological questions. Towards the end, we added that we understand ethics in general as a *communicative practice*. If we

interweave these two views with that of v.d. Pfordten, we come to realize that there is one aspect of ecological ethics which the dominating discourse has not given sufficient attention to: *language*.

With this realization in mind, one observation from the preceding chapter imprints itself lastingly on this journey. It is the seeming paradox that while still on land, we were *surrounded by absences*. We were so comfortably at home in our self-centeredness that the very fact that we were living among absences lay hidden perfectly behind static and nondescript language, language that anesthetized us, that did not challenge us to even begin to eavesdrop on those uncanny silences.

If I now steer away from this land, I wish to leave behind my human hermitage. What I am steering into is this vast, communicative realm. But of course I am taking my own center with me. In a multicentric world, none can leave their own self-centeredness behind. But each of us can set our own horizons in motion, and in moving, we can seek contact. And while we are moving, the unfolding and shifting contacts will protect us from falling all too easily back into beholding our *own* center as the *only* center. I have come to recognize that in living, we always move among other centers. That I have set sail simply means that I wish to *wake up* – a little more, and a little at a time – *to reality*²². What I wish to ask is simple: What could it mean to live in a communicative realm?

The lantern tinkles on

At last, I become aware again of the throbbing tinkling that makes my body quiver quietly. I blink, and I cast another look around myself. My vessel is gulped into a thick, foggy soup. I close my eyes and strain my ears. Without my noticing, the tinkling of the lantern has stopped. The sea has fallen silent. The

²² This admirable expression was suggested by Spaemann (1990:116). David Abram finds similar words: “A genuinely ecological approach ... strives to become ever more awake to the other lives, the other forms of sentience and sensibility that surround us in the open field of the present moment.” (in: *Between the Body and the Breathing Earth: A Reply to Ted Toadvine*).

ocean is holding its breath. Suddenly the clink of a raindrop breaks the velvet skin of the water. A single drop has tumbled out of invisible clouds. Now I hear another drop. Now another. Now the heavens break, pouring down streams of sweet rain. I blink, and I see the fog being washed away from before my eyes like dust from a window. I blink again, and I look around. As far as my eyes can reach, in every direction, the ocean stretches out toward the horizon. Little pearls of falling water burst through the smooth ocean surface, and tiny rings expand from every center of eruption, interweaving with one another, whispering to each other tales, spoken in tongues that do not resonate in my ears, but make my body sway. And as my boat rocks gently over the tiny mounds and vales of these tales, my ears are drawn in, once more, by the tinkling of the lantern.

2

Barriers to relationship

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make a word mean so many different things.”
“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.”

- Lewis Carroll -



THE RAIN HAS STOPPED. NIGHT HAS FALLEN ONCE AGAIN. THE OCEAN IS CALM. No clouds obscure the view onto the starry, starry night above. The dim beam of my lantern looks as if one such star has descended to give us light, and be our guide.

Our journey away from the human-centered island permits us not only to draw nearer others. It also enables us to cast an ec-centric look at the place we steer away from (and is not eccentricity perhaps just another word for multicentrism?). Old habits and points of view suddenly appear odd, similar to the way in which an organic, meaningful word will sometimes dissipate into random sounds if only we hum the word over and over again, like a ritual chant. Hum hum hum hum hum hum hum hum.

This chapter casts such an eccentric look at a number of speaking habits that we are of custom bringing along as luggage on this voyage. The rationale is simple: Our vessel is small, and we must travel light. We must not risk drowning because we have laden our vessel with too heavy a load.

The chapter has a twofold design.

Part I argues that the practice of definition acts as a barrier to experiencing relationship. The act of defining is inadequate and arbitrary when definitions are taken out of context, as often happens. Such de-contextualized defining perpetuates acts of power over and coercion of others, because in being defined into certain categories, others are robbed of the possibility to show themselves in their otherness.

This argument is not new, of course. Already Aristotle (Book I/*Ethics*) observed that our understanding of ourselves is limited by our own definitions of who we are. Hence, it would not seem worthwhile to spend much time on the argument. But the reader will find that novelty is not the issue in our case. What is actually the issue here is the *pervasiveness of the disease*: Some of the basic vocabulary of our Western culture is now being held under the spell of unwarranted acts of definition. Scrutinizing two terms central to the discourse of ecological ethics – *life* and *humanness* –, I show that the most effective tool to detect this pervasiveness is repetition. The entire discussion of *life* and *humanness* serves as a means to diagnose the disease of definition, and hence as a direct illustration of Aristotle's argument.

Diagnosis only serves a purpose when it inspires suggestions on how to treat our ailments. The treatment I appeal to in *Part II* of this chapter can be condensed into the formula *relational language use*. I argue that relational language use may break patterns of coercion of others, and seek creative relationships with them.

The conversation at the end of this chapter, that about *love*, illustrates the lengths relational language use can go. It also shows that relational language is already being practiced by nearly each one of us.

The chapter culminates in a new luminosity of our guiding question.

Part I. Exposing the barriers

THE WORD ‘DEFINITION’ STEMS FROM THE LATIN FORM *DEFINIRE*, WHICH MEANS ‘to bring to an end’, ‘to determine the boundaries of’, and ‘to restrict’. The danger of definitions, I claim, is that they can easily bring the questioning process to an end, and that they are believed to be the only ‘truth’ conceivable. If that happens, a barrier is erected between the one who defines and the one who is being defined. Open-ended communion that permits either side to inform the other becomes more difficult and will be, at worst, fully interrupted.

Defining Life

What is life?

To avoid confusion from the start: The ambition here *will not* and *cannot* be to answer this question once and for all. The question is invoked for the sole purpose of establishing a common platform from which to study and evaluate varying answers to that question.

The philosopher Angelika Krebs (2000:67ff.) points out correctly that the term ‘life’ is central to the moral tradition of Western thinking. She suggests that its central position bespeaks the importance of carefully pondering its connotations. Let us follow her suggestion.

What is life?

Krebs herself suggests that living beings be described *functionally*, on par with such machines as thermostats or chess computers, as most living beings do not pursue *practical ends*. She hypothesizes that it is not unlikely that a machine can be built which fulfills what to Krebs are the four basic components of life: metabolism, reproduction, mutation, and sensitivity. However, such a machine being – a machine –, Krebs would not consider it to be alive²³. She suggests therefore that next to a *biological* definition of life, there be another, a *lifeworldly*

²³ Unfortunately, Krebs does not elaborate on why she would not do so. She merely presumes that this verdict would be commonly agreed upon by all sides. If, however, it is *not* commonly agreed upon, then her subsequent introduction of a second definition of ‘life’ becomes superfluous.

definition of life. Krebs thinks this definition is necessary because the former biological one is unable to account for a qualitative *leap* in nature (2000:77). What she means by that becomes clearer when we look at how she qualifies her lifeworldly definition of life: She links it to the attribute of *perception*, or *sensing*. It is with sensing, according to Krebs, that the first essential leap in nature beyond mere functional organization can be recorded. It is a leap from functional *nature* that lacks all forms of perception or sensing to *life* with an inside perspective. Picking a flower, Krebs says, would not *kill* it (per definition) – it never lived in the first place. ‘Lower’ animals would not be killed, either. They would be “destroyed” (Ibid.:78). Irrecoverable coma patients would be “destroyed”, too, not killed. As would fetuses early on during a woman’s pregnancy (Ibid.).

Dietmar v.d. Pfordten claims that biologists find it relatively simple to distinguish between living and nonliving bodies. His claim leans on these two definitions of life:

1. Living beings are those bodies of nature that possess nucleic acids and proteins, and that are capable of synthesizing such molecules themselves.
2. Living systems are such that are able to actively maintain their state of a high order in a milieu of a low degree of organization, and to replicate. (2000; own translation)

The criticism that none of the preceding definitions can refute is the same one which has already been drawn upon to reject the concentric project in ecological ethics: *arbitrariness*. Krebs cannot account for why it is this leap from ‘functional organization’ to ‘sensing’ that ought to be the deciding factor of ‘life’, and consequently, of ethical considerability. What about v.d. Pfordten’s first definition? Most people in our culture, myself included, would agree that trees are alive. This general agreement is founded on little more than a shared intuition, an intuition that is nourished by our preconceptual, everyday involvement with actual trees. The intuition, however, runs into trouble when it is confronted with the expert definition of life (‘those bodies of nature that possess and synthesize nucleic acids and proteins’):

‘Is *everything* about trees alive?’, the definition seems to whisper seductively, only to hiss triumphantly:

'It is not. A mere thin layer of living tissue (synthesizing nucleic acids and proteins) enwraps an ever-thickening carcass of dead hardwood (synthesizing nothing), clinging to it for support and protection as it sprouts into the heights, withstanding the hardships of winter that force most woodless plants underground and into their roots, to await the thaw and blossoming as spring begins to rub its sleepy eyes. On the outside, too, this thin layer of life is shielded by essentially dead bark.'

If we combined this definition of life with the observation that there are parts of the tree which quite obviously are dead, we would be forced to say that *in reality*, a tree is not *simply* alive, but it is *more exactly* an assembly of three neatly defined parts. We would be forced to say that *in reality*, trees are actually dead-living-dead. But who would seriously do so – and end up believing in such a strict ontological divide? Who would do the same for *vertebrates*? All vertebrates share the trees' principle, only in their cases we are used to calling it spine, not wood! For that matter: Who would do so for ourselves? Try to abstract the dead parts of your own body from the living parts. Obliterate the nails. Abstract the body hair, the beard, the lashes. Define away the teeth. Then try to *believe* in the sharp division between the remaining *living* parts and their dead counterparts. Is this in any way conceivable?

The inadequacies of all preceding attempts to define life are most forcibly and most successfully exposed by James Lovelock. According to his Gaia Theory, our planet Earth's atmosphere, oceans, climate, and its crust (upon which the continents move) are not simply a neatly defined 'environment' for life. They sooner constitute an *inseparable part* of the very process of life. Lovelock writes:

The evolution of the rocks and the air and the evolution of the biota are not to be separated. ... There is no clear distinction anywhere on the earth's surface between living and non-living matter. There is merely *a hierarchy of intensity* going from the 'material' environment of the rocks and the atmosphere to the living cells. But at great depths below the surface, the effects of life's presence fade. It may be that the core of our planet is unchanged by the presence of life, but it would be unwise to assume it. (1988:33-4; 40; emphasis mine)

The intricate gravity of this core tenet of Gaia Theory, the well from which springs the strongest case against the definitions of life presented above, lies in the observation that between what we call living and what we call non-living, a

continuum spans its streaming wings, an impossibly vast and dynamic *hierarchy of intensity*, engrossing rocks and cottonwood, tectonic plates and dragonflies alike, seeping into Gaia's every filament the way specter-gray wafts of mist saturate dewy autumn lowlands. This tree that we have such difficulties in defining into dead-living-dead – does it exist in an ontological vacuum? Can we define it without paying heed to the very structure of its life cycle, and to the very texture of its particular home? I remember a particular day early last summer. As I strolled through the forest by my cabin home, I came upon a particular birch. This particular birch that I was looking at right then had negotiated its terms of growth through an enduring intercourse with a moss-covered rock-formation that slumbered beside it. The rock-formation, in turn, had been split in half by one of the birch's stronger root limbs. The chickadee chicks, nestled in a shelter of downs and twigs, close by the stem, high above the ground, craning their bare necks upwards with beaks gaping open, were as much part of this tree as was that line of ants that transpired from a moist hollow down by the ground. Its bark and tender branches showed that this tree fed the moose through harsh winters. It drew minerals from the soil. It was an active participant in the carbon cycle, and the oxygen cycle ... What ontological aberrations would we ask of ourselves if we tried to define any of this away from the tree? Every attempt to define the tree effectively isolates what is organic and alive into a stiff abstraction. Every such abstraction effectively sets up a barrier between ourselves and the living earth. Every such barrier encapsulates us a little more, and a little more, in our solitary modes of hearing, and of speaking.

As does Krebs, Arne Næss views life as a central term of our cultures. But he draws different conclusions from his view:

Among [...] enormous processes in time and space, one is nearest to us: *the unfolding of life*. Human beings who wish to attain a maximum perspective in the comprehension of their cosmic condition can scarcely refrain from a proud feeling of genuine participation in something immensely greater than their individual and social career. [...] all life on earth as *an integrated process*, despite the steadily increasing diversity and complexity. The nature and limitation of this unity can be debated. Still, this is something basic: 'Life is fundamentally one'.

(1989:165-6).

Næss's view is in line with that of Lovelock. Like Lovelock, Næss actively rejects a narrow definition of this mysterious phenomenon, life. He uses it "in a more comprehensive non-technical way also to refer to what biologists classify as 'non-living': rivers (watersheds), landscapes, ecosystems." To Næss, "slogans such as 'let the river live' illustrate this broader usage so common in many cultures." (1986/2003:265). Such a broader usage of the term 'life' is of course incompatible with definitions such as the ones given above. And that is just its strength: It erects no barriers that hinder us from relating one aspect of the living continuum to another. It enables us, for example, to ask about the relationship between the occurrence of life on a planet and the movements of tectonic plates, as Lovelock has done.²⁴ It also enables us to evoke this powerful metaphor of *health* that Næss has evoked in the latter quote ('let the river live'), and that Lovelock, incidentally, has recently come to evoke on a planetary scale as well ('Gaia has fever'). The metaphor is powerful for two reasons. *First*, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, *health* and *healing* share their etymological origin with the word *whole*. Far from being a romantic stereotype, the metaphor of health helps us ask more accurately about life as a whole, and about our own relationship to this whole. *Second*, the metaphor is powerful for a very pragmatic reason: It can be easily related to. Both Næss and Lovelock recognize that our ability to relate is a very direct and very decisive factor to be reckoned with.

Defining Humanness

This section argues that confusing the world of humans with – the world – is an ontological dead-end. But such confusion is just what happens when we allow definitions to overpower us.

What are humans?

Let us be on our guard again: We *will not* and *cannot* attempt to give a single, comprehensive answer to the problem. The question serves a single purpose: to

²⁴ Interestingly, this phenomenon has not been observed on any other planet besides our Earth

create a point of reference from which to view, and to evaluate, a number of different answers.

Some answers

The attempts to define humanness are uncouneted, and they are neither restricted to ecological ethics nor to philosophy in general. So let us begin simply by listing a few different answers to the same question.

Sigmund Freud, in a letter to Albert Einstein, tries to give an answer: “Conflicts of interest among humans are principally decided through the use of violence. This applies to the entire animal kingdom, of which man should not exclude himself; *humans, however, add to this conflicts of opinion that reach to the highest heights of abstraction and that seem to demand another technique of decision-making.*” (1932/2005:27; own translation & emphasis added). Helmut Mayer, in an article discussing bio-social access to autobiographical memory, tries: “It is true that we share simple forms of memory with animals, but the episodal-autobiographical memory ought to count among the things constitutive of an accelerated cultural evolution typical of humans.” (2006; own translation) Political commentator Theo Sommer navigates the fairway of H.G. Wells and gives it a go: “‘Our speculations about the future and all political guesswork are mere burlesque’, said Frederick the Great. Experience teaches that he is right. But man cannot help to live in foresight. This above all separates him from animals: he tries forever to anticipate, to predict, why – presumptuously enough –, to plan, *the shape of things to come* (H.G. Wells).” (2008; own translation) It is not uncommon to view the use of technology as the decisive defining factor for what it means to be human in contrast to others. Thus, Hal Wilhite says that “the defining element of becoming human is when we use technologies.” (2006) Martin Gorke defines humans against others with regard to morals: “Although some mammals (i.e., dolphins) show behavior astonishingly *analogous* to morals, it is generally accepted that only humans act morally, and that therefore only humans can be *moral agents*. For only with humans we may assume the necessary ability to reflect their actions, and at least a partial freedom

of will.“ (1999:119; own translation) This latter definition is a favorite among philosophers, shared, for example, by Holmes Rolston and Thomas Seiler. Rolston writes: “[H]umans are the only valuers who can reflect about what is going on at this global scale, who can deliberate about what they ought to do conserving it. When humans do this, they must set up the scales; and humans are the measurers of things. Animals, organisms, species, ecosystems, Earth, cannot teach us how to do this evaluating. But they can display what it is that is to be valued.“ (2003:153). Seiler drills his definition of humanness into the same notch: “What appears especially significant is that man is the only living being who is able to reflect the miracle of existence, the genesis and being of the universe and the process of life on Earth, and who is able to position himself *morally*.” (2000:184; own translation) There are also ways of defining humanness indirectly through a close definition of other concepts, such as culture or personhood. Clifford Geertz coined a classical definition of culture as a semiotic concept in which man is “an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” which means that Geertz takes “culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore [...] an interpretive [science] in search of meaning.” (1973:5). A second definition of culture by Daniel Bell, different though it may be, has a similar effect: “[Culture is] a sum of society’s symbolic ways to answer the persistent questions of humanity.” (cf. Witoszek 2007). Both definitions declare culture to be the exclusive province of human affairs. The final example on our list comes from Michael Esfeld, specialist in the discipline philosophy of nature. Esfeld defines humans indirectly via defining animals: “Animals are not persons. They form no thoughts with a particular conceptual content, and they do not act – they do not develop self-conscious intentions, nor are their actions something that they can be accounted for. Hence, although animals have no intentional disposition, they are very well in emotional states, and they possess interest. Most of all, animals are capable of suffering.” (2002:137; own translation)²⁵

²⁵ Cf. Jon Wetlesen (1999) for a similar definition.

What happens when definitions encounter the world

Even though we have not yet looked at any of the above definitions more closely, one thing will have become obvious already: *there are just so many of them*. But let us remember that ‘to define’ means ‘to bring to an end’, or ‘to determine the boundaries of’: Is there not a paradox here? How can each author claim to determine *the* boundaries of humanness when those boundaries are clearly as diverse as the number of authors themselves? How, in other words, can any of these definitions raise a claim to universal validity, why, to truth, when each picks out a different aspect and stakes its entire view of humans and their relationship to the world on their own, isolated model? Even before we have looked at some of the definitions more closely, the main problem they all share becomes obvious: Each of them artificially erects walls around what is ever-shifting, and what is radically continuous with the world.

Our observation only grows stronger when we invite some of these definitions to encounter the living world.

Take the last definition on our list, for example. The view that *personhood* is the defining element of humanness is being frequently falsified by behavior biologists. Thus, the Department of Behavioural Biology at the University of Vienna presents itself to the online community with the words:

A place where it has been shown that *fish listen* and speak, that *birds think*, have specific *character types* from hatch on, and their hearts throb in the presence of loved ones, that guinea pigs choose mates carefully to get along with *stress* in their lives, ground squirrels and hamsters organize development hibernation and *reproduction* to fit in! (*to the environment*), [and] *primates* use sexuality to organize their social lives ...²⁶

An exemplary case of the institute’s recent studies involves the social behavior of ravens (*Corvus corax*). This study of Bygnar et al. (2007) could not have been pursued had the team not departed from the basic assumption that “[c]omplex social behavior builds on the mutual judgment of individuals as cooperation partners and competitors” (2007:1). This, of course, opposes starkly to Esfeld’s definition of personhood. Bygnar et al studied the ravens’ social behavior in

²⁶ cf. <http://www.behaviour.univie.ac.at/>

hiding both food and inedible objects. They found that ravens, these most widespread birds of our planet, rapidly learned to distinguish between situations when a formerly unknown individual was acting competitively, and when it was acting cooperatively. Ravens were observed allowing humans to pilfer from them when they were hiding *inedibles*, but clearly avoiding all interactions when they were caching *food*. Bygnar et al. argue that this difference in behavior suggests that the caching of objects is “a form of social play, providing birds with an opportunity to learn about others’ responses ... without the costs of potentially losing valuable food.” (Ibid.) At times the birds even placed object caches near the experimenters, an act likely to test these potential competitors’ form of intervention. Furthermore, their play with hiding inedible objects directly influenced their hiding of edibles: “ravens proactively used the acquired information about the others’ pilfering behaviour to modify their caching behavior in the food context only.” (Ibid.) In essence, the authors argue that being able to predict others’ behavior is one key element of recurrent social interaction, providing as it does “the basis for any form of cooperation, competition, and culture in human and nonhuman societies.”

The last citation rattles at the bars of another favorite definition of humanness – *culture*, this heavily laden and heavily contested word-tumbrel. The way Bygnar et al. use it here is incompatible with the definitions that Geertz and Bell gave of the word. Quite clearly, the biologists indicate that man is *not* the only animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. Quite clearly, ‘culture’ here does *not* denote exclusively a society’s symbolic ways to answer humanity’s persistent questions. Yet while the natural sciences, too, continue to struggle with a clear definition of culture (cf. Laland & Hoppit 2003), evidence *that* other species have culture cannot be denied. One of the most compelling stories about animal cultures can be told of humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), who are known in Hawaii also as *great winged angels*. Male humpback whales, spread across entire ocean basins, are known to all share the same song at any one time (cf. Rendell and Whitehead 2001:312). This song is not static but

changes throughout the season. While humpback whales singing in Bermuda were observed to change 37 per cent of their song every season, and after a period of 15 years, the entire song had changed (cf. Payne & Payne 1985), other humpback whales off the Australian east coast were observed to change their entire song after only two seasons to match that of humpbacks from the west coast. Noad, Michael J. et al. (2001:537) ascribe this to the migration of a few 'foreign' individuals to the east. According to the authors, such revolutionary changes are unprecedented in animals' cultural vocal traditions, which suggests that novelty might be a driving stimulant in the great winged angels' songs. When we hold this example of an animal culture against Geertz's or Bell's definition, the arbitrariness and the serious inadequacies of their definitions becomes evident.

The same accounts for a second example of an animal culture, a culture, in fact, that has recently become seriously threatened: elephant culture. Before man's intrusion, elephants were accustomed to rearing their young in an intricate web of extended family that allowed them to become slowly acculturated into elephant societies. Elephant societies, similar to those of wild boars or killer whales, are organized around an experienced matriarch and a number of other older female caretakers. Decades of poaching, culls, and habitat loss have seriously disrupted these supportive strata, leaving them nearly fully disintegrated. The effects of this social breakdown are now rapidly accumulating. Incidences of elephant aggression include literally hundreds of encounters with humans that ended fatally for humans in the Indian states Jharkhand and Assam between the years 2000 and 2006; rapings and killings of rhinoceroses, unprecedented in their number, in Pilanesberg National Park and the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve in South Africa since the early 1990's; and up to 90 per cent of male elephants deaths now attributable to other male elephants in Addo Elephant National Park in South Africa, a number that only gains significance when compared to an average rate of 6 per cent of such casualties in more stable elephant communities (cf. Siebert 2006). Bradshaw et al. (2005:807) have taken up these developments to suggest that today's elephants are experiencing a form

of species-wide trauma. With trauma, the psychologists write, “an enduring right-brain dysfunction can develop, creating a vulnerability to PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] and a predisposition to violence in adulthood.” (Ibid.)²⁷ These incidences, brief though their presentation here can be, show how very little we know. The reality of these developments ought to caution us against any attempt to define culture as the exclusive cradle and playground of humans.

Summing up their own discussion of culture, Laland and Hoppit hit the nail on the head: “Culture is as rare or as common among animals as it is defined to be.” (2006:151)

Tuning in on just one more of the definitions – that of *technology* as the determining factor of humanness –, we find a bounty of instances that weaken the definition, and we need merely to list a few of them to show how arbitrary the definition is: Otters are known for their mastery of using tools, such as rocks, to loosen shells from the ground, and to crack them open subsequently on the water surface. Using comparable gear under quite incomparable circumstances, Egyptian vultures have a habit of dropping stones onto ostrich eggs, whose shells would be too strong for the birds to crack otherwise. Chimpanzees even prepare their own tools, breaking off branches, stripping them off twigs and leaves, before they carry them to a termite burrow, poke them in, and pull out an exquisite treat of termites-on-a-stick, ready to be relished. There are crabs that pick up anemones which sting when disturbed and hold them in their claws to fend off aggressors (there are people who ward off pickpockets with umbrellas in a likewise fashion), or that hold them so close to their exoskeletons that the anemones attach themselves and form a protective armor (mosquito spray serves an analogous purpose for anglers). Green-backed herons use bait to attract fish. The list continues.²⁸ The definition disbands. Leaving what? Startled termites and filled stomachs. If only we let them.²⁹

²⁷ Originally, the term PTSD was used by psychologists to describe traumatic experiences among humans alone, such as those of post-war children.

²⁸ cf. Griffin 1992:117ff.

²⁹ This could of course lead to a more rigid distinction between *technology* on the one hand, and *tools* on the other. But this could not solve the actual problem – arbitrariness. It would only relocate it.

Acts of defining are barriers to relationship

The single-most critical problem that these preceding pages have uncovered is this: *The practice of definition acts as a barrier to experiencing relationship.*

Only humans can form intentional thoughts? Well, then the ravens' ability to observe feeding competitors and to adapt their own behavior accordingly really must be an illusion. Culture is an exclusive human domain? Well, then the changing songs of the great winged angels must be a terrific coincidence. And why, the rapings of rhinoceroses and the deaths of hundreds of Indians by confused and violent elephants must be – well, perhaps – a rotten vintage? Having previously defined elephants into categories such as 'raw material' or 'trophy', we not only denied them the possibility to continue to live in their inconceivable yet adjacent otherness. We also denied ourselves the chance to relate to this otherness, and to attune our concepts in a living exchange. The elephants have now begun to cry out: Listen to us!³⁰

What all those definitions cause us to oversee is that just as there is an unbroken continuum going from nonliving to living and back, there is no radical discontinuity between humans and the more-than-human world, either. A growing number of influential writers and scholars from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds now expresses this view in their work. Some have already been mentioned. Others include such prominent figures as biologist and Nobel-laureate Barbara McClintock, poet and small-scale farmer Wendell Berry, theologian Anna L. Peterson, novelist Barbara Kingsolver, philosopher Neil Evernden, writer and activist Derrick Jensen, or the sociologist Ulrich Beck, to name but a few. John R. Searle (1995) condenses the view these people share into a formula that would seem to be too obvious to be worth the repetition: We live in exactly *one world*, not five or nine or seventeen. And all subdivisions we make through this one world must remain provisional.

Neither of these thinkers denies that there will always be differences. Their importance lies elsewhere. They all invite us to *also* pay close heed to the

³⁰ Some will be inclined to protest at this point and accuse me of anthropomorphizing. I answer by referring them to the further development of this thesis, especially to the argument I develop in *The Poetry of Leisure*.

many overlapping continuities and exchanges. We will not find it hard to hear these exchanges. We only need to listen.

Listening is the key here. Because it is just what is being most strongly compromised in isolated acts of defining. In being defined, the *living other* – with its inexhaustible immersion into the land, the sea, and the sky, into the moods and stories and histories of the places it inhabits – becomes replaced by a *model*. This model, then, takes over our thinking. No longer do we experience the other *as* that other; no longer are we open to the very peculiar skills it has developed in its very peculiar place within Gaia. We know it only in relation to our preconceived model. Suddenly, the notion of ‘normal’ forms in our thinking. Suddenly, (awe-inspiring) difference turns into (pitiful) abnormality. And our position as the measurers of the one world is once more secured a little more. Listening withers. Conversing becomes shouting. And the symphony goes silent.

A very subtle definition

Before we move on to explore how to face isolated acts of defining in Part II of this chapter, let us linger with the problem just a little longer. For there is a very subtle way of defining humanness that has been given too little attention in the discourse of ecological ethics, despite its great frequency.

Just *how* subtle this particular act of defining really is can be seen in the following quote, which is taken from the final paragraph of Anna L. Peterson’s *Being Human* (2001), a work that so forcibly and so successfully debunks the myth of an ontological dualism between humans and their living home: “Our world is full of wounds, human and nonhuman. The point, however, is precisely that we are not alone in it. We are not alone because we are connected to the wounded. That is why we care about the wounds or even notice them in the first place.” (2001:239) The definition that takes place here is so subtle, and so common, that it will hardly raise suspicion. The literature abounds by its

appearance. It appears frequently in Midgley's *Science and Poetry*, a book similarly successful in debunking dualism, and further in making pellucid the tremendous appeal and influence of imaginative visions: "Individualism is bankrupt of suggestions for dealing with ... non-human entities." (2001:257) This act of definition can be found in the deep ecology platform: "Richness and diversity of life forms are values in themselves and contribute to the flourishing of human and nonhuman life on earth." (Næss & Sessions 1999:8). This formulation is as common in the wider discourse of ecological ethics as it is in other disciplines and outside of academia.

In each of these instances, a definition is being set up of a dualistic ontology in which humans stand on one side, and *all the rest* – so-called "non-humans" – stand on the other side.³¹ This very subtle linguistic act of defining is often diametrically opposed to the intention of the statement. On the one hand, the above quotes proactively debunk dualism. On the other hand, they covertly uphold what they are overtly discrediting. In this way, these authors create an inadvertent and unnecessary internal dilemma, a paradox between content and form whose undermining effect, inconspicuous and gradual though it may be, is real. This quote by Stephan Harding cannot eschew the effect either:

Arne Naess emphasizes the importance of such spontaneous experience. A key aspect of these experiences is the perception of gestalts, or networks of relationships. We see that there are no isolated objects, but that objects are *nodes in a vast web of interconnections*. When such deep experience occurs, we feel a strong sense of wide identification with what we are sensing. This identification involves a heightened sense of empathy and an expansion of our concern *with non-human life*.

(www.resurgence.org/resurgence/185/harding185.htm; emphases added)

It might be thought as an act of hypercritical polemics to single out slips of authors that quite clearly share a vision of a unified world with a multiplicity of different actors, voices, and purposes. But such polemicizing is not the intention here. The intention is to lend strength to one of the core arguments of this thesis: *It matters how we speak*. The transitions in our conversing are delicate, and they are gradual. All too easily do we quietly domesticate others into the scales and

³¹ I have compared this definition elsewhere (Mueller 2007) with the attempt to create a dualistic ontology based on the (quite ludicrous) distinction "mosquito – non-mosquito world".

visions of our own making. All too easily do we nourish the concentric, dualistic world view that many are working against. Neil Evernden is aware of this dilemma. And while he, too, upholds it unconsciously, let us try now to listen again to the essence of what he himself wrote into the following sentences:

Once defined, the nonhuman other disappears into its new description: it is drawn into a symbolic system which orders and explains, interprets and assigns value. In short, the creation becomes ours as it is made 'real' by this assimilation. The wild other disappears the instant it is demystified and saved as a managed resource. (1992:131)

And because humans cannot help but try to make sense of the one world by clothing it into words, suggestions have been made to overcome this very subtle act of coercion. David Abram's (1996) suggestion to speak of a *more-than-human world* has already quietly found its way into these pages. Anthony Weston (2006) writes of *both human and other-than-human*. James Lovelock makes the related suggestion "that theologians shared with scientists their wonderful word, '*ineffable*'; a word that expresses the thought that God is immanent but unknowable." (Lovelock 2006:177; emphasis added) Finally, Evernden himself offers, next to the (very technical) term *ultrahuman*, the (far less technical) term *wildness*. Not to be confused with this myth of North American conservation jargon, wilderness, *wildness* "is the quality of this divine other, and it is wildness that is destroyed *in the very act of 'saving' it*. Wildness is not 'ours', indeed, it is the one thing that can *never* be ours. It is self-willed, independent, and indifferent to our dictates and judgments. An entity with the quality of wildness is its own, and no other's. When domestication begins, wildness ends." (Ibid:120)

'When definition begins', we may add, 'wildness ends.'

Part II. Breaking the barriers

IT HAS BECOME APPARENT BY NOW THAT THE ACT OF DEFINING POSES A THREAT to continued asking. This has led, throughout the chapter, to a revaluing of skepticism.

In his book by the same title, *Scepticism*, Arne Næss describes skepticism – or more specifically the Pyrrhonian skepticism of Sextus that Næss’s book interprets – with the words:

[T]hose who claim that they have found at least one truth [are called Dogmatists], those who claim that truth *cannot* be found in any matter [are called Academians], and those who neither claim that they have found at least one truth nor claim to *know* that truth cannot be found, but persist in their seeking [are called Sceptics]. (1968:4)

Næss describes the skeptic as a person who carries on seeking truths, and who tries to acquire knowledge through posing questions, but also as a person who by no means *expects* to find answers to her questions. The skeptic rather more tentatively “*assumes*” that she might find such answers, or that she will “at least [find] the possibility of getting answers” (1982:182). But to the (Næssian) skeptic, posing the questions is more important than finding the answers.

It was such a skeptical stance that led us to provoke questions vis-à-vis received notions of what constitutes ‘life’ or ‘humanness’, and vis-à-vis some of the speaking practices that tend to accompany such notions. This skeptical stance has induced a careful but persistent hesitation towards assertions that may not always be *intended* to be isolating, but that often have just that effect through the way they are being used. In cautiously rejecting such formulations as ‘there are *x* constituents to life’, or ‘man is the only animal that *x*’, or ‘humans and non-humans’, we simply wish to induce a watchful attitude that does not assert such formulations to be *definitely true*. Our skeptical attitude does not, in the first instance, wish to *refute* such claims once and for all. The more elemental incentive has been to carry the question marks back into our exchanges. It has been to add force to a principle argument of this thesis:

There is merit in seeking.

The divide between refuting a formulation and avoiding it in favor of continued seeking may be small, but it is by no means trivial. At no point throughout this chapter have we argued that acts of definitions ought to be completely avoided, even though we have come across several instances where such acts cause unforeseeable and even harmful effects. Acts of defining have been diagnosed as a treacherous disease, but their complete refutation has not been the intention. What we have worked towards is a more scrupulous, and more realistic, treatment for the disease.

Wedding skepticism with acts of defining

Whenever we speak, we make assertions about a certain state of affairs. Every speech act we utter raises a claim to a propositional truth. Every assertion stakes out a certain field within our boundless and fluid experiencing. *Everything* we say is, in this way, an act of defining. Such *methodological reductionism* is an epistemological tool that we cannot do without. It is often very useful. Sometimes it is indispensable. And we all make use of it. It only becomes hazardous when it turns quietly into *ontological reductionism*. When, in other words, the tentative outlining that our words undertake turns into a dogmatic doctrine. When we begin to take our words to be the direct and only ambassador of truth. When possibilities are denied that there might be *other* variants of truth.

This is where skepticism comes in. It is this concession to the utter uncertainties of what we deem to be ‘true’, and to the temporary character of all our knowledge, which provides us with just the counterbalance we need to go on using definitions as an effective and benign epistemological tool. Skepticism wedded with acts of defining is just what we need to strengthen this inherently dynamic and creative process called ‘language’ – namely by allowing it to be just that: dynamic and creative.

But let us go slowly and choose our words with care. Is there not a contradiction in these last two paragraphs? First we stated that every time we speak we commit

an act of defining, only to add that language is inherently dynamic. Do these two observations not contradict one another?

The newly-wed help us regain the vibrant balance of language

Ferdinand de Saussure, who is commonly regarded as the architect of modern linguistics for his posthumously published *Course de Linguistique Générale* (1916/1964), has depicted language by distinguishing between *langue* and *parole*. For Saussure, *langue* describes a formalized system of phonetic, morphological, semantic, syntactical, and grammatical rules, while *parole* describes the act of speech itself. Saussure does not describe *langue*, this formalized system, as a static, unmoving mass, but rather as a dynamic web, an organic mesh in which every single part is related to all the rest. No sign within this moving whole ‘possesses’ any significance by itself. Rather, each sign only *gains* meaning through its ongoing contrasting with other signs. The word ‘feeling’, for example, contrasts with phonetically similar words such as ‘peeling’, ‘reeling’, ‘ceiling’, ‘falling’, or ‘fooling’, but it also contrasts with semantically related words such as ‘emotion’, ‘passion’, ‘anger’, ‘lust’, ‘indifference’, or ‘apathy’. The same word also engages in a living exchange with more loosely participating words such as ‘numb’, ‘electric’, ‘song’, or ‘reason’, each of which again forms a living node that bonds with other nodes in this shifting system, *langue*, and so on. The dynamic structure of *langue* is assured through its multicentric composition.

Saussure teaches us that what appeared like a contradiction at first, is not really one at a second glance. It is very well possible to say that we commit an act of defining every time we speak *and* that our language is a dynamic process *at the same time*. We learn from Saussure that *langue* is a creative system which nevertheless has an inherent tendency to define (provisional) fields within the web.

We can now come to see how this relates back to our decision to wed acts of defining with a skeptical stance. We will keep in mind that Saussure’s *langue*

describes the strictly *structural* aspects of language. *Langue* is a creative *system*, a system that has a tendency to define provisional fields within its own web. We will now add that what we have called ‘acts of defining’ or ‘practice of definition’ throughout this chapter belongs to that *other* mode of language, to *parole*, or the *performative* aspect of language.

Our criticism has not, in the first place, been directed at the words, insofar as they are signs within *langue*. It has sooner been directed at the concrete *use* of these words, hence, at *parole*. But we have also found out that the structure as a whole is not left untouched by this use. We have learned how *parole* and *langue* are complementary modes of a single dynamic stream, modes that constantly influence one another. We have seen that where acts of definition prevail, they will also impact the structure of language: The more we define, the more rigid our language will become. The more rigid our language is, the more impoverished our perceptions will be. And the more impoverished our perceptions are, the less informed our actions can be.

So, finally, to draw a skeptical stance into this dance simply means to create a counterweight. With skepticism as our ally, we find that we have regained a vibrant balance: No longer does the vitalizing pair of creative *and* defining tendencies reside in *langue* alone. It has now come to dwell in *parole* as well.



THIS MAY LOOK LIKE AN INCONSPICUOUS MOVE. BUT IT MAY TURN OUT TO BE able to give great force to our journey as a whole. For we have now created a brisk tension, and one that touches the whole of language, not just either of its modes.

If we were to name this tension, what would we call it? Let us find a simple and clear name. A telling name. Let us call this promising tension *relational language*.

Relational Language

What is relational language?

Some might consider this bad news, so we will come forth with it right away: There can be no paradigmatic relational language. Still we cannot help but ask again:

What is relational language?

The most basic aspect of relational language will have become clear even before we introduced it under this tentative name: Relational language is not simply an opposing force to definitions. It cannot be. The two inhabit wholly distinct strata. The previous section ought to have shown that definitions are one subordinate *mode* of the superordinate relational language, a partial mode woven into a fluctuating overall fabric. Relational language is the arena where skepticism loosens the deadlock-strategy of defining and mobilizes its energies for an indefinite attuning to the world.

Relational language is less a *thing* than it is a *style*. As such, it cannot be nearly as effectively *described* as it can be *practiced*. So I will try to keep the descriptions here at a minimum and ask the reader rather to acknowledge that this thesis *in its entirety* and *on all levels* is an ongoing search for what relational language can be. And it being a search, I will further ask the reader to take none of the ‘answers’ as definite or final. They are merely my provisional understanding at this point of time, and at this place.

Relational language orbits watchfully around the relational unity of being. Along its path, it tries to clothe areas of the more-than-human world with provisional names, in an unending hermeneutical spiral of viewing and reviewing a problem. It draws nearer contextual meanings through a continued exchange between the questioner and the questioned. In this way, relational language *tentatively maps out horizons*. It does so *tentatively* because in the relational field of being that the one world is, the mapping out never stops. It is a *mapping out* because even though it is we who draw the maps, we must orient ourselves by the outlines of

the horizons we are bounded by. Finally, it is *horizons* we map out tentatively because as humans we are always restricted by the horizons of our own ability to experience the world. Like the rolling seashore washes up the beach, patiently grinding rocks to pebbles, setting about change in the landscape with slow persistence, we may continue to run up against these horizons. Which is just what I decided to do when I first set sail, and which is just what I am going to do for the remainder of this journey. What use has this? It lets us become aware that there *are* boundaries. Furthermore, we may foster a sensitivity for their topography – our orientation will be enriched through our deepened awareness and sensitivity. We will begin to sense the permeability of our horizons. For horizons are no definite borders. My horizon moves as I move, shifting my vision ever so slightly as I continue to immerse myself in the terrain through which I journey.

But does relational language only lead us into arbitrariness again, this stalwart ally of definitions?

The contrary is more likely: That it prepares us against arbitrariness. By constantly running up against our own horizons, we are setting them in motion. Yet never will we bring about their full dissolution. We will refine our sensing. We will sharpen our wit. Ultimately, we will be better prepared to orient ourselves in the relational field of being of the one living world, of Gaia. Relational language arouses a vivid way of speaking that is as much a vivid way of thinking. It stirs forms of speaking that are as much informed by listening to human words as they are by listening to the land, the rivers, the mountains, and to the inscrutable cadences of all their inhabitants. We mentioned this earlier: Listening is the key here.

Let us eavesdrop only on a single instance in literature where such relational language is being practiced, and on the controversy that this oft-quoted text has stirred. Now that we have been given this phrase to taste, *relational language*, – now that we sense the weak pull of that little center of gravity hitherto inactive – we will not find it difficult to side with one of the two camps of the controversy.

The text we are speaking about is Aldo Leopold's essay *Thinking like a Mountain* from his beautiful book *A Sand County Almanac*. In the essay, Leopold recalls an episode when he, working as a so-called 'game manager', shot and killed a wolf. He writes: "[T]here was something new to me in those eyes, something known only to her and to the mountain. I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunter's paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view." (1949/2005:130) It is the very name of Leopold's essay that has caused the controversy. What does it mean to think like a mountain, exactly? What does Leopold mean when he says the mountain disagreed with the death of the wolf?

The first camp has decided simply to dismiss such talk because of its alleged impreciseness. Philosopher Richard A. Watson writes: "What *would* it be [...] to think like a mountain, as Aldo Leopold is said to have recommended? It would be anthropocentric [sic]³² because mountains do not think, but also because mountains are imagined to be thinking about which human interests in their preservation or development they prefer." (1983/1999:117).

But the other camp finds that such analytical rigidity does no justice to the full scope of meaning carried in Leopold's words. The alleged impreciseness is rather the recognition that different contexts require different levels of preciseness. Leopold does not actually suggest that a mountain can think in human terms, nor that he himself is able to think like a mountain. The ecologist and teacher of Gaian science, Stephan Harding, sees this clearly. In the following quote, Harding smiles away the clouds of analytical inflexibility that block Leopold's luminous words. In doing so, Harding stumbles upon relational language: "Clearly, [Leopold] used the word 'mountain' as shorthand for the wild ecosystem in which the incident took place, for the ecosystem as an entirety, as a living presence with its deer, its wolves and other animals, its clouds, soils and streams." (2006:43)

³² It is likely that Watson actually meant to say 'anthropomorphic', not 'anthropocentric'.

What does it mean to think like a mountain, exactly? Why not ask Leopold himself what *he* means by that in *this* particular case?

Since then I have lived to see state after state extirpate its wolves. I have watched the face of many a newly wolfless mountain, and seen the south-facing slopes wrinkle with a maze of deer trails. I have seen every edible bush and seedling browsed, first to anaemic desuetude, and then to death. I have seen every edible tree defoliated to the height of a saddlehorn. Such a mountain looks as if someone had given God a new pruning shears, and forbidden Him all other exercise. In the end the starved bones of the hoped-for deer herd, dead of its own too-much, bleach with the bones of the dead sage, or molder under the high-lined junipers.

I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer. And perhaps with better cause, for while a buck pulled down by wolves can be replaced in two or three years, a range pulled down by too many deer may frail of replacement in as many decades. (1949/2005:131-2)



RELATIONAL LANGUAGE IS AS OLD AS IS ARISTOTLE'S OBSERVATION OF THE danger of definitions as barriers to relationship. It may not have been called just that. But what is more important, it was being *enacted* all the same. We just saw one such enactment. In the conversation that follows, we will see a few more. We will see that relational language use can be vastly liberating, and that it has the power to unleash us from our own confinement in a world of definition. This conversation will also locate our discussion of relational language use more precisely within our overall journey.

We will speak about *love*.

Defining Love?

The pattern we use is familiar by now. We start by asking a straightforward question:

What is love?

Lacking sufficient material from the discourse of ecological ethics to confront this question, let us do what might be the most obvious thing: Let us consult a dictionary. What do we find? The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, authoritative voice in the philosophical landscape though it may be, has no entry on love. So let us do what might be the second most obvious thing: Consult a non-specialist dictionary. The Oxford English Dictionary is the definite

guide and guard of the English language. That's something, at least. Then why not begin there? So, OED: *What is love?*

[Love is] That disposition or state of feeling with regard to a person which (arising from recognition of attractive qualities, from instincts of natural relationship, or from sympathy) manifests itself in solicitude for the welfare of the object, and usually also in delight in his or her presence and desire for his or her approval; warm affection, attachment. ...

[Love is] That feeling of attachment which is based upon difference of sex; the affection which subsists between lover and sweetheart and is the normal basis of marriage. ...

These are but two of fifteen subcategories of love according to the dictionary. But can these answers satisfy us? Why not?

No matter how many definitions of love we seek, or how long they are – they will not quench our thirst for a satisfactory answer. They do just the opposite: They are like salt water on our tongues, leaving us ailing, wanting. Thirsty.

What is love?

Emily Dickinson has asked the question, and her answer, austere though it may be, has the taste of *freshness*: “That Love is all there is / Is all we know of Love; / It is enough, the freight should be / Proportioned to the groove.” (*poem 1765*; 1890/1960:714). The same freshness – albeit tinged in sorrow – flowed from another poet's quill some two hundred and seventy-five years earlier: “For we, which now behold these present days, Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise,” wrote William Shakespeare in 1609 (*Sonnet 106*; 1999:129). Let us for a moment hold on to the taste of salt that still lingers on our tongues, and while we do, let us trace this new apprehension of freshness a little longer. Let us suppose that these poets were after something. Are we then to take to heart the counsel of yet another poet, Fyodor Tyutchev, who wrote:

How can your heart itself express?
Can others understand or guess
exactly what life means to you?
A thought you've spoken is untrue.
You only cloud the streams you've stirred.
Be fed by them. Don't say a word.³³

³³ Tyutchev, Fyodor. *Silentium!* Translated from Russian by F. Jude.

We know the problem by now. It is simple, and it is terrific: No attempt to define love can ever be successful. The only thing that *logos* is able to determine about love is that love cannot be determined: Love ‘is’ something that continually evades encroachment; love eludes every form of imprisonment; love corrodes all logical caging. Are we then to be satisfied with being fed only by our own silence, as Tyutchev suggests? A person can survive three weeks without being *fed*. A person can survive three days without drinking *fresh* water. We cannot help but ask again:

What is love?

Love penetrates religion. Albert Schweitzer, not only eminent for his ethics of the Reverence for Life, but also for his theological writings, writes of the historical Jesus: “Jesus introduced into the late Jewish Messianic expectation [of the end of the world and a supernatural Kingdom of God] the powerful idea ... that *we may come to know God and belong to him through love*. Jesus is not interested in spiritualizing realistic ideas of the Kingdom of God and blessedness. But the spirituality that is the life of this religion of love purifies like a flame all ideas that come into contact with it. It is the destiny of Christianity to develop through a constant process of spiritualization.” (1933/1998:56. my italics) It is in this long tradition of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth that Pope Benedict XVI interprets his own pontificate. In the first encyclical of his pontificate, published on Christmas 2005, Benedict XVI describes God as love: “Deus caritas est“. Love is strong in Buddhism, too. Love springs from *compassion*, this heart of Buddhist ethics. Buddhist compassion far exceeds mere emotion: Such compassion is a force in itself, anchored in experiencing *shunya*, the existential wholeness of all being, which according to Buddha was “not born, not made, not created” (Weber, Renée, in: Dalai Lama 1997:68; my translation). It is against this backdrop of existential compassion that the 14th Dalai Lama speaks of love. Love, the monk says, is “what you can also possess for someone who has done you harm” (1997:69)³⁴.

³⁴ It is impossible *not* to hear the conflict between China and Tibet, which so recently has been rekindled, in these words. It is perhaps fair to say that the Dalai Lama’s life-long practice of compassion towards the

There is freshness in this. Still, and strangely, our thirst persists:

What is love?

Love lives in the Greek tragedies. Love roams in woods through changing seasons, breathing, seeing, writing, sucking the marrow out of life. Love dances with the daffodils; love grows in eternal lines to time; love teaches us with her looks such art of eyes we never read in books. Love echoes throughout every ancient and modern art form – from the silent film to folk songs, from oral traditions to photography, from letters to inscriptions on rune stones. In fact, love echoes throughout *every* form of human expression. Love – together with life and with death – is central to all human endeavors. Grasping life and love and death are the eternal quests of mankind. Love flickers in the eyes of aged siblings at last reunited; love lets the graves of the deceased explode with colorful blossoms every spring; love covers these same graves with sprigs of fir at the eve of every winter. Love builds homes and hospitals; love hoisters flags on white, quivering flag pulls; love reverberates through the mountains as the echo of the wanderer's song; love brushes the newborn infant's auburn hair with trembling fingertips. Love rumbles in the stomach like an insatiable hunger; love is kept in jars and boxes and cupboards and envelopes to shelter it from time's decay; love drips in thick, wet drops from the child's crusted fingers onto the tower of a sand castle; love hums wordless tunes to the round belly in which life is once more rehearsing its greatest play; love lights lamps in creepy darkness to shine for the vagrant; love paints a single streak of yellow onto a brown, muddy canvas; love tends to the tomato plant seedlings in early summer; love waters the wilting plants in the oppressive August heat; love picks ripe, juicy fruits at the end of a prodigal summer. Love is sometimes called blindness, and sometimes called hatred ... *Love has uncountable names*. And here is what is eerie about each of them: Each of love's names is a *full* expression of love. Still, none may say *fully* just what love is. This inability to 'say' what love is has escorted children, women and men throughout the ages. But has it blemished their travels? Have their backs been crumbled by this impossible burden? Quite the opposite. Their

Chinese, even in the face of the terrific cruelties they have been inflicting on his peoples, is the best illustration of his own words.

inability to say what love is has not stopped generation after generation to embark on the grand adventure of seeking its essence. The evidently and inevitably tragic outcome of their quest has not hindered mankind's children to engage on their Sisyphean task with the most awesome enthusiasm, time after time. The quest for love shatters every logical imprisonment, and every final definition: Its force is greater, its achievements dwarf the moralizing undertone of *logos* ("But you simply *cannot* do it!"). The old story has a tacit twist: Love says to *Logos*: "Let's try to find out what Love is". *Logos* replies: "But Love, we simply can't." To which Love says, with a philandering smirk: "Indeed – and that is why you and I will do it again, and again, and again!" This, in fact, is more than a comical episode, more than a faint smell filtered out of bypassing air currents by quivering hair inside our nostrils. This is the distilled essence of the fragrance we are after. *Even though our logical formulae cannot ultimately split up this one world and herd its scattered remains into definite and isolating pens, we are bound to try to define. We are bound to try to make sense of the one world. But these definitions need not – and in fact often do not – stop us from continuing our search all the same.*

Love cannot be defined. Still, love ridicules the self-admiring dominance of *logos* with *play*: *Logos* becomes love's tool, a toy in the hands of love. The perpetual play that unfolds between them is both of utter earnestness and of tender bravery.



SHAKESPEARE ASKED: *WHAT IS LOVE?* SHAKESPEARE WAS PAINFULLY AWARE OF his inability to find a single, universal answer. Shakespeare composed as many as one hundred and fifty-four sonnets in the attempt. *Even so.* Where did he arrive, in the very end? Where *could* he arrive, but here:

"I, my mistress' thrall, Came there for cure, and this by that I prove:
Love's fire heats water, water cools not love."

Towards a new reading of the question at the base of the lantern

Each attempt to define either life, humanness, or love, contains the threat that it might hinder us from further investigating, and worse still, that we may come to believe we really do inhabit these abstractions. Each such attempt potentially turns what was originally a tool into a dictator, overpowering and coercing that which is being defined as well as those who are defining it. This is not too strong a metaphor. ‘Dictation’, before its political connotations, primordially denotes an ‘authoritative utterance or command’, but also an ‘arbitrary command’.

Such dictators may then provide a seemingly rational soil on which to plant not only ontological distinctions between humans and ‘x’, or living and nonliving, but also *moral distinctions*. The concentric project of ecological ethics is spellbound by precisely this problem. We got a taste of how such silent definitions dictate their own translation into moral gradations in the first chapter, when we looked at some of the ongoing discussions regarding notions such as ‘consciousness’ (cf. sentientists) or ‘interest’ (cf. biocentrists). Seen in light of this second chapter, however, such discussions lead us far astray, for they miss the essence of our problem: That in continuing to define ourselves as being essentially different from x, we continue to estrange ourselves from the breathing earth that spawns and envelopes each of our thoughts and sensations. The same holds true for the way in which our discourses tacitly buttress the dictatorship of definitions. It is blatantly dangerous to continue to speak of an ‘environment’ made up of ‘non-human’ ‘resources’, etc., and to think that all has been said.

The conversation about love has opened up quite an extraordinary vista, though. We have seen that there are instances in the lives of each of us when we simply do not let our definitions stop us. No answer to the question what love is will ever be accepted as the one and only, *especially not* those answers that others have given. Regardless how many generations have given words and thoughts to love, we do not let them hinder us from continuing to ask anyway. No answer to the question what love is becomes our dictator. Every answer is but a playmate of the others. This is relational language incarnate.

The question relevant for us then becomes: Can we channel this same attitude towards the question at the base of the lantern?

Is it possible to speak about the way others experience in their own, particular ways? Thomas Nagel thinks it is not possible because we do not know what it is like to be them. Let us now add:

But still we cannot help but ask, again and again – what it is like?

Just like love cannot be suppressed, so our question cannot be silenced by Nagel's answer. In asking, we caution ourselves against defining others into arbitrary categories of our own design. In asking, we continue to seek relationship with wildness, and to create a living and livable morality. In asking, we aspire to see our own lives enact a living communion with the one world and all its inhabitants. In asking, we enact relational language.

It will not have gone unnoticed until now that two weighty terms of the guiding question – 'others' and 'experience' – have not yet been further specified in the course of the thesis. What does it mean to speak of *others*, exactly? And what *can* we possibly mean when we say that such others *experience*? Asking ourselves these questions is a fresh breeze that hugs the sail of our vessel.

What *I* mean by 'others' exactly, I do not know. I simply wish to keep asking the question. In doing so, I wish to break free from a vicious circle that Evernden has so eloquently delineated: "Every question we ask, every solution we devise, bespeaks mastery, never mystery: they are incompatible. Yet wildness, otherness, *is* mystery incarnate." (1992:121) Evernden goes an important step further even from this insight. He adds: "But perhaps even wildness is an inadequate term, for that essential core of otherness is inevitably nameless, and as such cannot be subsumed within our abstractions or made part of the domain of human willing." (Ibid.) Rather than presenting a pre-digested definition of what *I* mean by the words, I wish to let myself be drawn into the questioning process itself. I wish to become immersed in uninterpreted events of creativity, events in which meaning is created in the process of the immersion

itself. Events of *creativity* are opposed to events of *destructivity*. The latter deny immersion from the start.

Arne Næss advocates that we *identify* with the more-than-human world, a world which he calls the greater Self. The echo of the need for such identification reverberates through ecological ethics until this day. In a way, I use otherness as a tentative opposite pole to identification. But my concern is not polar. I wish to let myself be enticed by a dynamic force-field in which both identification and otherness draw me into a moving nexus of *relationship*.

With a multicentric vision of the one world, we simply cannot define otherness *a priori*. In the lifeworld of the magpie that liked to crown the spruce outside my cabin window before I set out on this journey, I was an other. In my own lifeworld, this magpie was an other. Both of us were others to a mouse who once discovered that my fridge had been thoughtlessly left ajar, and who had used a wooden ladle to climb in and out of a pot with leftover soup. We were all others to the lichen-covered rocks that languished ever so slowly atop shadowy marshes just north of the forest clearing where I lived.

Otherness, just like identification, is not a universal category. Each is a vibrant presence that lingers in a particular place at a particular time, bidding us to attune our senses to its own rhythms. Each presence that we encounter – be it a ptarmigan that starts very suddenly from its boulder hideout as our heavy boots make the ground tremble, or a cloud that we watch being born from the emerald water of a glacier lake, or an adder that straitens itself up on the sun-soaked trail before us – arouses us in our bodily immersion, and bargains with us the precise sort of *relationship* that our encounter spins, now, here. Both identification and otherness are timbres of the same animated and improvised song.

Again, we find that enactment gives a truer taste of the phenomenon than plain description. Freeman House, recalling a spontaneous encounter with salmon, writes:

Each fish brought up from the deep carries with it implications of the Other, the great life of the sea that lies permanently beyond anyone's feeble strivings to control or understand it. This is information received and stored in the body; it may or may not be available for mental deconstruction and articulation; it is reinforced by the memory of the muscles and nerves, which when one is on a boat are constantly working to maintain balance in response to the long, rolling

swells of the ocean. True immersion in a system larger than oneself carries with it exposure to a vast complexity wherein joy and terror are complementary parts. Life and death are no longer opposite poles of individual existence but parts of a pattern so large that the only adequate response is surrender. (1999:70)

Renée Askins has attained a strikingly similar attitude through her immersion with a young wolf, whom she called Natasha.

For years I have tried to capture in words exactly how Natasha was different from my other animal words. The clearest description I can offer is that she had an essence of ‘other,’ rather than underling. I felt accompanied rather than ascendant. [...] It is difficult to articulate how such a tiny being was capable of conveying such an independent presence, but it was distinctive and determinate in the nature of our relationship. [...] One can feel one’s mind stretching to encompass and absorb the recognition, the idea of such a thing – of such an otherness. [...] Her diminutive presence connects me, includes me, and I recognize that I am, like her, merely a pulse in the rhythm of the world. (2002:15)

Both House and Askins engage in a book-long meditation about what this particular otherness that has drawn them into dialogue might mean. They ask how it can be spoken of. How it can be thought of. How the two are related. Both House and Askins seek understanding through continued asking; both remain wary of the enticing temptation to draw hasty conclusions. Both are an inspiration for this journey. *The question at the base of the lantern simply opens up the possibility of thinking about others as experiencing in their own, particular ways.*

This might seem outrageous to a sentientist, to whom ‘experience’ is clearly defined by that other clearly defined notion, ‘consciousness’. But Mary Midgley has argued that consciousness, too, cannot possibly be defined by any specialist:

Consciousness ... is not just one more phenomenon. *It is the scene of all phenomena* ... [It] is not one among a class of parallel instances as football is one among games. It is a term used to indicate the centre of the subjective aspect of life. Understanding such a word means relating that aspect fully to the other aspects. And this business of relating is ... inevitably an art rather than a science, though of course sciences can sometimes form a very important part of it. (2001:114/175; emphasis mine)

In the same way, any attempt to define experience dissolves before the eyes. A promising way to grasp how experience *can* be understood is to look at its German equivalent, *Erleben*. Derived from the stem *leben*, *Erleben* simply links ‘experiencing’ to ‘living’: *In living, a living being experiences*. Or, to put it

differently: *In experiencing, one lives*. This is not an act of definition. It rather gives a good airing to the semantic scope of either term, opening vast possibilities for our relating to them.

But is this sufficient? Is this not a tautological move? Does one not simply escape responsibility by framing one non-definable term (experience) through another (life)? Quite the contrary. To do so is the most responsible act we can commit: We become aware that it is impossible to take on such a stunningly large, diverse, and fluid part of the world – that which we call *life*; that which Lovelock calls *Gaia* – all by ourselves, or of handing it over to the razor-sharp blade of the specialist. Life experiences so many different facets that the attempt to shoulder all of them on our very small, very limited, very local flesh, would be devastating.

The lantern tinkles on

Our guiding question has not been left unaffected by the deliberations in this chapter. We can now rephrase it substantially: “Is it possible to bring our own layers of experience into consonance with the uncounted other layers of experience?” Mice experience. Fish experience. Trees experience. Humans experience. Algae experience. Life experiences. Gaia experiences. Each experiencing makes the one world vibrate in the tone pitch of its very own chord. Each strike of the chords chants a peculiar tune. Each tune is a single bar in the symphony of the one world. But to believe that a single tune could perform the entire symphony, is to fall deaf to its beauty.

There are many silences environing us now.

What can it mean to tune in to the symphony?

3

Experiencing whales

To see the Summer Sky / Is Poetry, though never in a Book it lie – / True Poems flee –

- Emily Dickinson -



THE WINDS AND THE LANTERN HAVE GUIDED MY VESSEL TOWARDS A CONCRETE communion. I have steered northwards. I have navigated beyond the Arctic Circle to traverse the unpredictable paths of a particular band of others. Swift and powerful creatures they are, black-and-white leviathans who spend their nomad lives off the Northern Norwegian coast. These enigmatic presences follow the great herring migrations throughout the sun's cyclical progressions the way their ancestors have done for as long as human memory reaches back into the shadows of our shared history.

Much have I spoken about direct experiencing. It was inevitable that at some point of this journey, I would have to leave these pages, and to throw myself into lived experiencing itself. At this junction of my voyage, what began as an allegory is metamorphosing into the lived chronicle of my sojourn in the home of killer whales, who are known to locals as *bacon-tearers*³⁵.

³⁵ The Norwegian word 'spekkhogger' has its origin in a long-standing acquaintance with the creature: people observed that the whales sometimes ripped out large chunks of flesh from the hides of seals or other whales. Such observations have also informed the English name. The name does not imply that killer whales are the bloodthirsty 'killers' that a melodramatic reading of the word might imply. Killer whales are known as such simply because they have been observed to *kill other whales* as prey.

Part I. Looking

IN THE DEEP OF NIGHT, SHELTERED FROM THE HOWLING BLASTS OF A southwestern gale that drove in from the open ocean, sensing air currents sigh chilly stories through the wooden cabin walls, in a faraway land, on a faraway island – my body awoke from its recent petrification. The stiffness that had gnawed itself into my flesh and bones let go quietly. My lungs breathed rhythmically again. In. Out. In. Out. Blood pounded in my ears. Blood returned to the capillaries in my fingertips. Made them tickle. My eyes sought firmness. They could not withdraw their stare from a knot-hole on the cabin ceiling. My stomach still knew the turbulences of the crossing. The final passage to the islands to which I had come to commune with killer whales had been a maddening ride through troubled waters. The iron-boat had thrown its massive body into whirling towers of waves. It had been hurtled about by gusts like a toy. The hull had creaked and moaned achingly. I had been a crumb in its belly. Helpless, irrelevant.

But I had arrived. I had arrived on these islands amidst a furious sea. And as I was lying inside my cabin, comfortably covered by a duvet that safeguarded the warmth that my body produced, drifting slowly into sleep while the storm continued to toil the night outside, I tried to imagine what it must be like. Out there. For whale.

Encounter

It first happened a few days later. Our Zodiac rubber boat was steering out into the drowsy tranquility of Vestfjord, this vast and deep stretch of water that separates Lofoten from the mainland of Northern Norway. The fjord bore no semblance to the William Turner-kind of greeting it had given me upon my nocturnal arrival. The day was crystal clear. Few clouds dotted the sky. The mountains glared pink and pastel blue in the arctic light. As we were steering further out into the fjord, Lofoten shone in the West like a pallid band, a necklace of rugged snow piles strewn into the ocean by the hands of a giant.

The first we saw of the killer whales were their blows. We approached slowly and turned off our engine. Then, suddenly, a large male broke away from the group, his back fin splitting the water as he dove. Even my untried eyes saw that he swam very swiftly. He came right towards us. Just before it would be too late to dodge collision, he sounded. As he flashed past us underneath the boat, the white of his eye patches shone light-blue through the shallow coat of water above him. He surfaced a few boat lengths away, sounded again, and disappeared in the distance ...

Another encounter

It happened again. Heading away from Henningsvær, this archipelago at the foot of precipitous mountains which we called our home and base, and steering eastward into Vestfjord, we stopped for several look-arounds, scanning the horizon for disturbances on the water that might have indicated the presence of whales. During our first stop we caught no signs. The sea was glowing with placid calm. On we rode, and soon we stopped again to have another look. There was the hunch of a fountain rising from the water just below the horizon in the south-east. Then it was gone again. Eyes strained, fixed on a spot amidst a spotless vastness, we waited. The fountain rose again. Other fountains joined in. The day was crisp and clear. White sunlight radiated out of an unbroken cobalt sky. The rays struck the fountains and illuminated them momentarily. Even from this large distance we knew that the killer whales were keeping to the surface. We approached them slowly, then turned off the engine. The whales showed no signs of unease. They moved constantly, but they were not traveling. They kept to the same area, and at times they came within close proximity of our boat. They did not directly approach us, but neither did they shy away from us. Our leader recognized the group. She knew it had been in the area off and on for at least ten days and nights now ...

Yet another encounter

It is comforting not to know which encounter will be your last. When it happened, I had not the slightest idea. As we rode swiftly across the fjord in our rubber boat, abreast with the water itself, shaken by too many cement crests to count, I shrank and shrank until I became a dwarf. I sensed in my limbs the proximity of the sky as gravity wedged my body between the heavy air and the heavier sea. My back hunched as Earth spread out her roundness around us, bending horizon and landmasses and clouds in unison. We rode on the roof of the globe, and nowhere else had this globe ever actually been so round. White-tailed sea eagles wafted on cushions of air as if gravity were but a fairy tale, and a lone golden eagle sought the commonality of his littler brethren. A fist-sized auk startled up with hectic flaps just split seconds before we thundered past her. A handful of arctic gulls floated in phlegmatic boredom on nearby waves. I began to stiffen from clutching at the ropes, from curling up into a ball so as to preserve as much body warmth as I could muster, and my cheeks and nose had long forsaken to lodge complaints about the biting frost. The mountains of the mainland in the east were closer now than those of Lofoten in the west, although either was a good stretch away.

And suddenly her black fin rose out of the sea in front of us. And another. And yet another. An entire group of killer whales was traveling through the twilight ...

A methodological note

When I first devised this chapter, I envisioned it to be an entirely phenomenological account of my experiences at sea. Killer whales would be the gravitational force of every nerve and word of the chapter. The prose that would flow out of my remembering body and through my interpreting pen would made for a proper haven for the thesis, I hoped (this chapter was originally designed to follow after all the others). The chapter's purpose would have been simple: To behold killer whales in their home, closely, intimately, and to ask how they spend

their time amongst their kin. Not to explain, but only to describe. And through the description to plant the seeds of a *relationship*. What better illustration could I have produced of language used relationally, of a tool that boosts and communicates communion, of a lens through which to perceive otherness, and through which others would be invited to become unveiled – a bit at a time, in part, and never fully – in the process? So I went to sea. My journey was made possible single-handedly through the generosity and trust of my mentor, the biologist Heike I. Vester, leader of the Ocean Sounds project that has developed a rare synthesis of science, art, and unconventional, small-scale eco-tourism. In the back of my mind were the words of Anthony Weston:

[W]e can no longer think of ourselves as merely responding to a world considered to be given and fixed. If our very mode of approach shapes that world in turn, then ethics itself must be a form of invitation or welcoming, sometimes of ritual invocation and embodiment and sometimes of literally creating the settings in which new possibilities might emerge. On the usual view of other animals, for instance, we must first know what animals are capable of and then decide on that basis whether and how we are to consider them ethically. On a more open-ended view, we will have only inadequate ideas of what other animals are actually capable until we already have approached them ethically: that is, until we have offered them the space and time and occasion to enter into relationship. (Weston 2006:76)

At sea I had the great fortune of encountering killer whales, time and time again. But I could not write the chapter that I had originally imagined. It was Shakespeare who whispered to me now: “and every fare from phare sometime declines”³⁶. My *phare* – my light – was unchanged. I needed only to absorb with my ears and skull the steady tinkling of the lantern at the bow of my vessel to be reassured of that. Yet my *fare* had declined. I had fared off my original course.

What had happened? To approach an answer, let us cast a second look at each of the three episodes.

³⁶ This is, of course, merely a homophone *variant* of what Shakespeare actually wrote in line seven of sonnet no. XVIII. The original line goes: „And every fair from fair sometime declines“ It is Hans-Dieter Gelfert (2000:219) who speculates about the possibility that Shakespeare might have furnished this stratum of the famous sonnet with a double bottom.

Part II. Looking again

Encounter revisited

... EVEN BEFORE WE ARRIVED AT THE SCENE, THERE HAD BEEN THREE OTHER boats with the killer whales – a veteran ferry, and old sailing ship, and a large and swift rubber boat. Each of these boats was laden with tourists. Every time the group of approximately seven killer whales surfaced after a dive of many minutes, three engines could be heard roaring. Next, three bows could be seen turning toward the whales, approaching them, closing in on them, beleaguering them. Each of the whales' brief breathing period was followed by another lengthy dive, leaving three boats idling nervously. On it went, this sinister variant of hide and seek. One time the boats managed to wedge in the entire group of killer whales between them, leaving them no space to hide but the depths – which, evidently, is a poor hiding place if you and your family must drink from the salty surface air in regular intervals, lest all of your bodies would revolt, be forced to drink from the salty subsurface water in the last panic-driven moments of your consciousness, and ultimately, drown. So you are imprisoned in your own home. And the sentry at the only exit passes the waiting in glee, for they know that you must come out, sooner or later.

Although we could not be sure of it, of course, the large male's sudden and quick breaking away from the group was strikingly reminiscent of an attempt at flight. It might also have been that the male, in making his breakout so eye-catching, was trying to distract attention from the rest of his family and onto himself, so as to disperse the besiegement and give some rest to his siblings, aunts, uncles, and his mother.

Another encounter revisited

... We began to discern a pattern: It did not take long until two more boats approached this group of killer whales. The first boat, an old whaling vessel turned into a whale watching boat, appeared satisfied with keeping a reverential distance between itself and the whales. It stayed around for some time, but left

again before the whales were showing signs of disturbance. Not so the second boat. This rubber boat, filled to the rim with snorkelers, raced repeatedly to the whales. It stopped just in front of where the whales were swimming, and snorkelers dropped from the boat like the proverbial rats desert the sinking ship. Heads submerged, their black silhouettes drifted at the surface. They were too heavy and too unapt to swim around themselves. All they could manage was to stay afloat, and to wait.

It might have taken as long as a heartbeat, or the length it takes for the eye to blink and open again: Black, indifferent shadows darted past them. Then there was only murkiness again. And embalmed in it, somewhere, out of the snorkelers' sight, living bodies continued their communal ambulation.

The whales were long out of sight by the time all snorkelers had been gathered in again by the boat. Yet off the boat went for its next noisy pursuit of the whales. Its speed made it simple to catch up again. Again snorkelers plunged off their rubber shell into an element that left them all but paralyzed. Again giants drifted past them without effort, and without paying heed. Again a human heart could not have beat more than once.

Yet another encounter revisited

... There were as many as seven boats this time. An eeriness volatilized from the toppling masts and droning engines as they stalked black phantoms through the waning light. Sounds and movements solemnized this slow-motion procession, this motley crew of vessels, this maritime carnival parade that lacked all drollness. Had it not been for the flashlights of cameras that sliced fissures into the bluish black of the Arctic afternoon-night, one could easily have been lured into believing one was witnessing a funeral cortege. The killer whales were nervous. They dove often and changed their course. We knew through a friend who had phoned us that the whales had been beleaguered for three and a half hours by the time we arrived. At that time and that place, three and a half hours equaled the better part of a day. It equaled the better part of the time the whales had to search for prey. This group had counted twenty-some animals when it had

first been sighted in the morning. During the ongoing siege it had dispersed into a number of grouplets, the last of which was now trailing all seven boats behind it. We kept in the distance. We watched as the last whales were traveling southwards toward more open waters. Suddenly a male killer whale broke through the surface in an awkward fashion and slapped his fluke hard onto the water. Foam splashed behind him, then settled again. Then the reverberation of the splash reached our ears. He repeated this behavior a full six times. Seven boats took no notice of this obvious signal of distress. The parade continued.

Part III. Scrutinizing

THE QUESTION STILL HOVERS IN THE AIR: WHAT HAD HAPPENED? ON THE surface, I had made the simple observation that I was by far not the only one who sought the nearness of the whales. Yet underneath that, the focus of my chapter had slightly but decidedly shifted. *My conversing with whales had been delayed by my observing my own kin.* I soon realized that what may seem like a bothersome detour at first glance is actually an inevitable stage of this journey. Why? Because, as Weston has remarked, our very mode of approach shapes the world we approach in turn. Not until if we come to terms with our own part of the relationship can we freely approach others. So we must ask: How do we establish a relationship with whales? More specifically: What role does conventional tourism play in our attempt to establish relationships?

The hypothesis I have drawn from my time spent close to the killer whales of Northern Norway is that as participants in conventional tourism, we define our relationship with whales in a very narrow way. As a result, each such contact must remain a mere feigning of a reciprocal, open-ended, multi-voiced communion. Conventional tourism defines our relationship with whales even before we allow ourselves to be drawn into mutually enriching exchanges. Such acts of definition pre-scribe the subsequent encounters into narrow, impoverished, and destructive patterns.



TO DELVE INTO THIS HYPOTHESIS MORE CLOSELY, IT WILL BE USEFUL TO rephrase it and elevate it – momentarily – to a level of greater abstraction: *Conventional whale watching tourism is a striking example of how humans define themselves and others through the transformative powers of technology. There is an imminent codependence between ontology and technology.*

This hypothesis is rooted in the work of the phenomenologist Martin Heidegger. Heidegger showed that we must become fully aware of our relationship to technology if we wish to come within reach of a more attuned relationship to the world again. An excursion into Heidegger's thought will therefore be invaluable to back up our hypothesis.

The meaning of being

As mentioned in Chapter One in the context of Ecosophy T, Martin Heidegger's work offers an alternative viewpoint at the character of the ecological crisis. In ancient Greek, *krisis* denoted a 'judgment', a 'deciding', or a 'sentence'. For Heidegger, the judgment we are faced with is our very relationship to the shifting nexus of being into which we are embedded. The question of how we relate to the earth has its origin in the far more comprehensive question of the sense or meaning of being as such. Heidegger first brought up this question in his famous (and famously massive) book *Being and Time* (1927), but it would nurture his thinking throughout his life.

This sense or meaning of being that Heidegger asks for must not be misunderstood as the search for some sort of a-temporal, infinite, universal meaning of everything. Heidegger's philosophy has nothing to do with a dinner-talk-kind-of philosophy that babbles about some mystical, everlasting 'meaning of life'. On the contrary: *That being itself is radically temporal is his foremost, and perhaps most important, insight.*

Humans are temporal creatures themselves. Humans, like all else, shift and change through time; time is both the cause and course of their metamorphoses. And like all else, humans have their particular rhythms, their human pace. If these humans now set out to ask about the meaning of being, they must first acknowledge this full temporality of being, and they must recognize their own involvement in it. Their method of inquiry, and consequently their answers, depend on this: A *scientific* or *theoretical method* will be no good, according to Heidegger, simply because such a method idealizes the so-called objective viewpoint. It idealizes ideas that are derived from withdrawing the subject neatly and cleanly from its problem. But how can we withdraw ourselves from the problem if our only avenue *to it* leads through our very own involvement *with it*? How can we ask about the meaning of what is inherently temporal when we leave aside our very own temporality? It was Heidegger's great merit that he acknowledged this problem, and that he honed his method appropriately: He adopted not a theoretical but a pragmatic method. The question about the meaning of being is inherently *phenomenological*. Those who ask about the meaning of being cannot withdraw themselves from being. There would be no question without the questioner. There can be no objectified theory of the meaning of being because it is impossible to stand outside such meaning.

Heidegger's phenomenology sought to de-construct what he called the "history of being", by which he meant the history of our metaphysical tradition. He sought to clear away the various interpretations that have become attached to the meaning of being throughout the history of metaphysics, layer by layer, to draw nearer an originary, primordial *experience of being*.

Constant presence vs. the full temporality of being

The question of the meaning of being departed from the principal observation that throughout the history of metaphysics, even back to its first beginnings with the ancient Greeks, what has remained unthought all along was *being as such*. Instead, metaphysics thinks about *entities*. Being, then, is simply taken to be the ground on which entities are. Being, 'on' which these entities are, thus takes the

form of a timeless and static presence-at-hand. This observation enabled Heidegger to reveal what traditional ontology has taken to be the most basic sense or meaning of being: *constant presence*.

Throughout the history of being, this constant presence has become known as *constant availability*. Only what is constantly present can be studied in a way that forces it to become fully *known*. And only what is fully known can become constantly available. Only when we believe that it is principally possible for us to fully know all aspects of an entity can we believe that the entity is calculable and quantifiable. Only what we can quantify and calculate can be exploited, manipulated, dominated, or controlled. And if we believe *the world* to be constantly present, then the world becomes calculable, quantifiable. Knowable. Inside-out. This has of course great significance for our hypothesis that as participants in tourism, many of us define our relationships with whales even before we can be drawn into creative, meaning-giving exchanges. But before we lend our undivided attention to the hypothesis, let us look more closely at the positive alternative Heidegger uncovered to the ‘knowing’ of being as constant availability.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger shows how presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*) is a derivative mode from a phenomenologically more direct presence-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*). Let us not get confused by the unfamiliarity of Heidegger’s lingo³⁷; let us see through it to grasp its meaning: Prior to subjecting the world to our objectifying gaze – through which everything is constantly present, available, and knowable –, our involvement with the world reveals itself as something that is *always already meaningful*.

Presence is not constant, but it is an occurrence, or more accurately, a presencing. Discussing Heidegger’s later writings, Bruce V. Foltz remarks that “the true pace of being is not one of permanency or constant presence but rather of an abrupt or sudden emergence that lingers and abides for its own while.”

³⁷ Which is an insoluble part of Heidegger’s project, because the metaphysical layers which he wishes to deconstruct are supported by our common ways of speaking. Heidegger *must* speak in an uncommon way precisely because of the close liaison between what we deem to be the truth, and the ways we speak about our ‘truths’.

(1995:54) Presencing needs no solid ground from whence it can emerge. There *is* no prior origin from which being emerges. Being rather simply happens, abruptly, suddenly. The Greeks must have been more attuned to what this means than we are today, for they had a word for it: *phusis*. *Phusis*, which is related to the temporal *phyéin*, has the basic meaning ‘emergence’. But it is an emergence that is connected to concealment. *Phusis* is “that which unfolds and emerges of and from itself, while continually returning back into itself” (Ibid.:10). It is decisive to consider this self-emergence as comprising presence in its interplay with absence.³⁸

I am holding a piece of wood in my hand right now. Its shaft is pear-shaped and smooth to the touch. From it branch out three curved limbs like points of an antler. Yet I can only see this one side of the piece. Its other sides are concealed to me, withheld from my scrutiny by the shape of the wood itself. If I want to see another side, I have to turn the piece in my hands. From this new angle the antler is concealed to me, as is the pear shape at the bottom. Now shaft and limbs are all aligned before my eyes in a single form. A small stub has emerged into view. I brush my fingertip across and feel its chapped texture. Dim light falls through the window and illuminates miniscule filaments, making the whole piece of wood look like a twisted muscle fiber. And as this wooden *strength* of the piece emerges into my perception, its overall *shape* is withdrawn into concealment. Not only the entirety of the piece, but every single part of the wood resists being owned by my perception once and for all. It is never the same; I discover something new about it every time I look. I can try of course to cut and crumble the entire piece of wood into small shavings, hoping I will detect what stuff it is *really* made of. I can try to force its concealment out into unconcealment, to bring to light all aspects of it at once. But in doing so I would only destroy it. I would deny myself the chance to discover ever new expressions

³⁸ As we mentioned briefly in Chapter One, *phusis*, or *physei on*, was later translated by the Latin term ‘*natura*’. Interestingly, this translation to *natura* loses part of the original meaning of *phusis*. Although it succeeds in retaining the aspect of ‘emergence’ – as *natura* derives from the term ‘*nasci*’, which means ‘to be born’, ‘to develop’, or ‘to emerge’ –, what is lost is the aspect of ‘self-concealment’, or ‘absence’. To present-day speakers, even the other fragment of the original meaning – emergence – is largely lost. The word *nature* has now become a favorite battleground of ideological tug-of-wars, a chief witness for either side of a convoluted ideological spectrum.

of the piece; I would fragment it and deprive myself of being continually informed by its organic presencing. Whatever I do, I can never totally exhaust its *phusis* with my perception. The reason is that like myself, this piece of wood is a temporal being, and like myself it has its very own pace and rhythms, different though they may be from my own. The fibrous surface tells of a particular growth rhythm while the wood was alive, informed by solar eclipses and the shifting seasons. Its grayness tells of how its color fades in its very own pace. Even decay has its own pace, though I may be unable to experience it. Its casual pace may be withdrawn and concealed from my own rhythms.

My ongoing involvement with this wood tells me of its ongoing *phusis*, and every glimpse I catch is fresh and new, for I cannot own what is not constantly present.

Phusis is a mode of *poiêsis*, or of ‘bringing forth’ (Heidegger 1962/2002:11). *Phusis* is not the only kind of *poiêsis*. There is a twin. Its name is *technê*. In contrast to *phusis*, which is an emergence from and out of itself while continually returning back to itself, *technê* is that which is brought forth by the artisan or the artist (ibid.). What is decisive about the bringing forth of *technê* is not that something is *made* or *utilized*, but that an *un-concealing* is taking place.

The same piece of wood rests in my hand again. I am holding a knife with my other hand. Chips fall to the ground. The antler-shape has intrigued me to search for something within the piece. As the chips are forming a small mound on the ground, a shape is being brought forth from within the wood. There are hollows for eyes. There is a hump for a nose. The pear shape takes the form of a body in motion. The body is all muscles. A stag emerges into being. *Technê*, like *phusis*, is a bringing forth. But as just mentioned, *technê* is a bringing forth not as making, but as un-concealing (Ibid. 13). The antler has been concealed inside the wood the all along. I did not make it. I only fostered its emergence. I was able to do so because I allowed myself to be drawn into a mutual relationship with the piece of wood.

Clearly, the two twins are not identical. While both *phusis* and *technê* are modes of bringing forth, the latter, *technê*, is a subordinate mode to *phusis* because it requires *someone* to prompt the bringing forth. The former, in contrast, is the higher form of *poiêsis* because it is a bringing forth or emergence from and out of itself.

All of this serves as a foundation to support the hypothesis that conventional forms of tourism define our relationships and feign actual communion with whales. The missing link between the above remarks and this hypothesis is, of course, modern technology. It is obvious simply by looking at it that modern technology must be related to the ancient Greek *technê* one way or another. Their etymological relatedness cannot be a coincidence. The question is simply: What is their relationship?

What has Heidegger got to say about this?

According to Heidegger, both *technê* and modern technology are forms of revealing. In this they are alike. But modern technology is essentially different from *technê*. Its essence bears no resemblance to the attuned bringing forth of *technê*.

Modern technology is a ‘provoking’, a ‘forcing out’, a ‘challenging forth’ (Ibid.:14) of what lies concealed in the world to generate energies. What is constantly available becomes calculable and quantifiable. Our metaphysical tradition sees things or entities as constantly available, and as such it deems them fit to be provoked or forced out whenever demand calls for them. The forcing out of technology has become the most obvious way in which entities can be approached today; it has become the omnipresent way in which their being is manifested, leaving no more room for otherness, for difference, for primordial self-emergence. For *phusis*.

That is why Heidegger calls technology “the completion of metaphysics.” (Foltz 1995:6)

Technology as the culmination of metaphysics: nature as a standing reserve

Heidegger understands technology not simply as the sum of technological tools or mechanical instruments. Technology much rather constitutes a metaphysics in its own right. Technology as a metaphysics gives our present age the very basis upon which our conceptions of truth are formed. As such generator of truth, technology is the completion of metaphysics.

The move that Heidegger makes is familiar to us from Chapter One. There we established that it is *correct alright* to display unifying holistic positions as the outermost of the expanding circle. But still this display misses *the essence* of unifying positions, which is that they dissolve the human-centered vision of the world from the beginning.

Likewise, Heidegger asks about *the essence of technology*. He departs from the two traditional answers to the question. The first answer says, “technology is a means to an end”. The second answer – familiar to us already from the previous chapter – says, “technology is a human undertaking” (cf. Ibid.:6). According to Heidegger, both of these answers are correct³⁹. But “the mere correctness of something is not the same as its truth.” (Ibid.:7; own translation) Only through coming to terms with its relation to truth can we approach the essence of technology.⁴⁰

It was mentioned earlier that *technê* as a mode of un-concealment is before all a bringing forth, not a making of something. It is a bringing forth by the artisan or artist who is attuned to the material he is working with. Heidegger remarks that from early Greek thinking on until Plato’s time, *technê* was related to *epistemê*. Both *technê* and *epistemê* are designations for ‘knowing’ or ‘becoming and being familiar with something’ (Heidegger 1962/2002:12f.). Thus, what was essential about the former mode of un-concealment, *technê*, was

³⁹ Although we do know the limitations of the second answer by now, of course.

⁴⁰ Both technology and *technê* are modes of revealing or un-concealment. In ancient Greek, the word *aletheia* denoted ‘un-concealment’, ‘unhiddenness’, or ‘dis-closure’. It was later translated by the Romans into Latin *veritas* (Ibid.:11), a form that survived in Modern English as ‘verity’ until the late 19th century (cf. OED), and that still lingers today in the verb ‘verify’. Present-day English speaks of ‘truth’, whose origins lie in the Germanic languages, and whose original connotations digress both from *veritas* and *aletheia*, as it originally denoted “the character of being, or disposition to be, true to a person, principle, cause, etc.”, or the “faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty, constancy, steadfast allegiance” (ibid.).

the attunement, or the knowing. The essence of my carving the stag out of the piece of wood was my prior attunement to the wood.

This essence is not shared by modern technology. The un-concealment brought forth by technology is not an attunement or knowing. It is a challenging forth. Modern technology drives out, provokes, and forces others into availability and calculability; it imposes upon the world the demand that it provide energy.

The essence of technology is yet another way of defining. What is being defined is the way in which we can encounter the being of an entity, and hence the entity itself. What is further being defined is the way in which such entities – others – can manifest themselves. In defining the being of entities, technology manifests the concealed truth of our world. Foltz writes:

[T]o be' is 'to be a resource,' that is, to be 'in stock,' in supply, ready for delivery. It is through the *constant availability* of entities that are revealed solely as an ordered, regulated inventory firmly installed within the technological framework [*Gestell*] that the metaphysical quest for *constant presence* finds its final and perfect culmination. (1995:103)

Our modern languages are now infested by this essence of technology. We have all at least heard of such an ominous thing as “conservation” of “natural resources”. Few of us flinch when “raw materials” such as fish are “harvested” from the seas, or when “calculations” of a “stock” have shown that a (careful) “population management” is possible, if not recommendable, for a “sustainable development plan”. The fact that such language has come to dwell in the midst of our lives, and that we continue to welcome it there, speaks volumes about the lasting sharpness of Heidegger’s insight, and about the lengths we still have to go to overcome being defined by technology. Once again, we environ ourselves with silence when we could play in a symphony.



DURING MY STAY ON LOFOTEN, I DOCUMENTED AT LEAST TWO WAYS IN WHICH whales are being objectified through the transformative power of our technologies. *First*, whales are defined into being a monetary object. *Second*, whales are defined into being an object of our dreams.

Whales as a monetary object

A leading whale watching company from the northern part of the rugged Lofoten-Vesterålen archipelago distributes advertising brochures in which every visiting tourist is *guaranteed* that they will see whales! Now, it is a fact that a relatively stable population of male sperm whales, *Physeter macrocephalus*, resides in Bleik Canyon, a rich feeding ground along the continental shelf off the north-western shoreline of Lofoten-Vesterålen (cf. Whitehead 2003), so this guarantee is not entirely a castle in the air. But we must admit that it is at least a grand mansion in the air when we consider a minor geographical detail: Sperm whales live in the sea! Is this too obvious a claim? Perhaps. Perhaps not. The sea is the epitome of the non-definable; it is an elemental, moving mass. It is forever agitated by the moods of the winds; it is forever stirred by the cyclical progression of the sun and moon, and by the groaning of the shifting continents; its surf is forever licking at the sands and rocks and cliffs of the world's coasts. The sea is a three-dimensional realm that knows no lines. And in this immeasurable realm, each of its dwellers is free to roam at will, and according to the rhythms and skills they are gifted with. Sperm whales, incidentally, are exceptionally gifted when it comes to their ability to move around, and male sperm whales, being larger by far than females, are superbly gifted. They are believed to be able to dive as deep as 3,000 meters, and they hold their breaths to stay underwater for an average of 30 – 45 minutes (Ibid.:79), two factors that greatly increase their home range.

All this to say that there is a striking disparity between promise and fact. Tourists are guaranteed sperm whale sightings. But that is quite simply, and quite obviously, not possible.

The authors of the brochure know this, of course, and no visitor will take the guarantee literally either. Behind the rhetoric of the promise lies a very pragmatic agreement between the whale watching company and the tourists, an agreement neatly covered up by this euphemism: That the customers will be allowed to go onto another trip another day, provided that a trip really will pass without a single sighting of a fluke or a curved back. Looking at this strictly as an

economic transaction between customer and seller, this surely sounds like a clean deal. The seller offers a product, but because the product is – admittedly – somewhat difficult to control, why, even elusive to the point of being stubborn, the seller embroiders a delicate expense allowance guarantee into the contract, finely sewn with a golden thread: *guaranteed!* And in buying such a guarantee, the tourists not only comply with this atomistic clearance sale, but they patronize it, perpetuating the neat and shiny affair.

But we all know: All that glisters is not gold, and not only because Shakespeare had the Prince of Morocco say so in *The Merchant of Venice*. The dirt sits in the pores. Heidegger suggests that we sniff at the pores, and we establish: Sperm whale is being reduced to being mere a commodity. She is defined into being an isolated good that is severed from the relational bonds into which she fluidly reassembles, and in which she is at home. Sperm whale is unconcealed from her *phusis*, from her unending self-emergence and self-concealment. Sperm whale is set to be constantly available, challenged forth to be constantly retrievable, forced out to be observable at demand. The humdrum lingo of the tourism industry becomes a stupefying clamor, a monotonous shrieking that monopolizes our perceptions, and that corners sperm whale into an ontological blind alley labeled ‘living resource’. As our perceptions line up behind the apathy of our droning, the very being of sperm whale is increasingly derived out of the essence of the mass tourism machinery. As our conversing assimilates and pauperizes, as we go blind to the nuances and variations of momentary encounters, we drive sperm whales into the clean equations of our economic jargon: *guaranteed!*

Whales as an object of dreams

A Dutch couple who has been traveling the world in pursuit of whale sightings for years now joined our team in the Zodiac one day. It was a good day, we saw

killer whales.⁴¹ All day, the Dutch couple was busy taking photos and shooting videos of the killer whales. Back on land, as we were peeling off the many layers of protective clothing, they said to me, chuckling: “It is always the same. Every time we come back home from one of our excursions, the first thing we must do is look at our footage to find out *what it was we actually saw out there.*” Upon my question why they didn’t take some more time out at sea to look, they said: “We can’t let the chance pass us by to get a nice shot.”

A photographer who had come to Lofoten to write an article about the scientific work of Ocean Sounds confided in me the evening after he had encountered killer whales for the first time: “Sometimes today I was wishing I could lay the camera aside. I felt as if I was not really being there by only seeing everything through the lenses of my cameras.” He also said that he hoped he would get the chance to just sit there and watch these animals, free from his gear, through his own eyes, before he had to leave. So I offered him that the next time we went out together, I would just take over his job for a day and let him get away from his lenses. He declined that offer. “No, no. I really appreciate that, but I might just miss a great picture.”

The same late-afternoon on which the troubled male killer whale slapped his fluke hard onto the water surface six times, two guests from Germany had come out onto Vestfjord with us. As the sun was setting and we were packing up to steer our rubber boat back home to Henningsvær, one of our guests said: “It would be nice if we could see the killer whales just one last time before we have to leave.” To which the other replied, confidingly: “Yes, and if only one of them would jump up right in front of the sun for us. *Think* what a picture that would make!”

The pattern was repetitive, it was predictable, and it never once failed during my stay in the Arctic: As soon as one or more black fins split the water,

⁴¹ In line with the vast majority of our encounters with them, these animals, too, were traveling. It was a behavior pattern most certainly impacted by the absence of the herring – the traditional prey of Norwegian killer whales –, who were keeping further up north for the time of year than the years before. The reason for this was most certainly that the seas were unusually warm for the season, and herring like it cool (cf. Heike I. Vester, personal conversation). The killer whales returned to what used to be plentiful feeding grounds, but, finding little to feed on, they did not linger the way they had done the years prior.

faces on the whale watching vessels hid behind the lenses of reflex cameras, video cameras, and underwater handy cams (“Oh, this is nothing fancy”, I was told once by a Danish photographer while we were waiting for the whales to resurface after a dive, “I left my real underwater camera at home because I couldn’t carry it.”). What connects these examples is that in each of them, whales are objectified into being a mere raw material. ‘Resource of luck’ we might call this raw material, or ‘the stuff from which dreams are made’. This ‘stuff’ is the solidified debris of what we are challenging forth: Forcing whales out of their continuous self-emergence and self-concealment, out of their ineffable otherness, we really do experience whales as *photo icons* in a primordial, elemental way; it is fair to say: in an ontological way. And what holds true for photography holds true for snorkeling just the same: A two to three-second adrenaline rush through the body, caused by the shadow of a giant black creature that slips past and away in the murky water, is indeed taken to be a *communion*. A rush unthinkable without an awesome array of gear is indeed taken to be the primordial way of involvement, the ‘real’ way of relationship. But it is not. In each of these cases, the very being of the whales is derived out of the essence of our gear. We define whales into being an inventory or stockpile of constantly available resources, readily available at all times. The full temporality of each of our encounters is overlooked and forgotten. Process is frozen into product; coming, lingering, and fading are all amalgamated into one; a momentary encounter between two fellow creatures in a particular place at a particular time – a meeting at the undulating seam of air and sea, one mild November afternoon in the Arctic, a few days before the full moon – is petrified into two-dimensional images. As our encounter with killer whales is stored for possession, duplication, and consumption, it is cast into molds designed by our technology, and stripped of its power to spawn relevant meaning, here and now. Tourism thus performed attempts to bring the living world in conjunction with the images we all know from books, magazines, computers, and flickering TV screens. It carries with it even to the remotest places its suitcases full of dreams, so large and thick that it can only be impossible for whale – and for all those others whom our lived

stories interweave with along our way – to live up to these dreams. All of us who become a motor of such tourism help to generate the energies that tacitly bend the world into the schemes of their own, pre-defined expectations. Our hearts and minds are so stuffed by images that everything that is taking place now, here, must rebound from our sensing skins like a rubber ball off a concrete wall.

“How cute”, one tourist exulted when she witnessed another distressed male slap his tale hard onto the water surface, “the whales are waving to us.”

The very being of our relationship is indeed defined by the transformative power of our technology.

The lantern tinkles on

There is good news in all of this. A different reading of the signs permits us to find not only a testament of how far we have wandered astray. This different reading reveals to us also the testament of our unending search, of our deeply rooted longing for relationship. (Why else would anyone volunteer to cast themselves into a turbulent midwinter sea just degrees above the freezing point, and directly in front of the largest and least contested predator alive in any of our world’s oceans?) This search needs not lurk about nervously, unable to satisfy its own desires because there is always the hypothetical chance that next time, there will be an even greater moment to catch on camera; next time, the killer whale will hurtle its massive black body out of the water, in pursuit of a herring, directly in front of the setting sun; next time, a white-tailed sea eagle will snatch the terrified fish directly out of the gaping mouth of the jumping giant. Watching whales needs not be defined by the essence of technology. It needs not be a simple economic transaction. Real whales – creatures living, drifting, breathing, singing, loving, playing out here in the elements – need not be mere photo icons. We need not continue to condemn whales into such objectification, such ontological isolation. We need not continue to condemn ourselves to such loneliness, such deafness. The lantern tinkles on and on; the signs are plentiful. We *want to* tune in to the symphony. Our search continues: *how?*

4

The poetry of leisure

The philosopher ... is a perpetual beginner, which means that he takes for granted nothing that men, learned or otherwise, believe they know. It means also that philosophy itself must not take itself for granted, in so far as it may have managed to say something true; that it is an ever-renewed experiment in making its own beginning; that it consists wholly in the description of this beginning, and finally, that radical reflection amounts to a consciousness of its own dependence on an unreflective life which is its initial situation, unchanging, given once and for all.

- Maurice Merleau-Ponty -

The poetry of earth is never dead.

- John Keats -



‘THE GOAL OF THIS THESIS IS TO SEARCH FOR THE MEANING OF THE QUESTION.’
Thus began this journey. So, now. *Have* we found it? Have we found the meaning of asking it?

We asked: Is it possible to speak about the way others experience in their own, particular ways? We had Thomas Nagel answer with what seemed the common-sensical answer: No! Why did we not simply stop there?

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/2006:214) reminds us that all forms of communication “transform a certain kind of silence into speech.” This thesis set out to give speech to a silence so silent that we are collectively used to not even remembering it *as silence*.

Chapter One showed how others continue to be silenced in the dominating, concentric discourse of ecological ethics. This silencing coincides with an unspoken perpetuation of a single-centered vision of the one world. But so long as we continue to see ourselves as the one and only center, and to define everything else from this center as a mere ‘environment’, so long will we continue to silence all those others with whom we inhabit the one earth. Is it possible to speak about the way others experience? It may not. But if we wish to dissolve our destructive, single-centered vision in favor of a more attuned, multi-centered vision, then our question is a valuable starting point.

Others are not only silenced through the concentric project. They are also, more generally, silenced through acts of definition. We uncovered a number of these acts in Chapter Two. We saw not only how such acts isolate ourselves, but also how, as in the case of the elephants, they isolate others in a world increasingly out of touch with its primordial and dynamic richness, thus causing unforeseeable horrors. Can we speak about the way others experience? Perhaps not. But if we continue to ask anyway, we caution ourselves from believing that our own way of experiencing is essentially the only one. We continue to ask precisely because we wish to remain aware *that* others experience, each in a peculiar, special way. And suddenly we are free to wonder in all earnestness even what this outrageous thought might mean: *Gaia experiences*.

In Chapter Three I did what had become indispensable by then: I left the written page and ‘went out’ myself. Laden with no particular hypothesis but merely with an awkward question and the wish to immerse myself in the phenomena in the most direct and uninterpreted way, I sought to travel light. I ventured to the killer whales as they migrated in and out of an enormous body of water known in our own tongues as Vestfjord⁴². What I found there was both

⁴² Which, incidentally, is another act of defining: To call this very deep and very large body of sheltered sea ‘Vestfjord’ in ‘Northern Norway’ easily makes us oversee (and hence forget) that these are strictly human coordinates, determined as much by a political status quo as by our human way of seeking orientation in the more-than-human landscape: ‘Vestfjord’ – that is a fjord ‘west of something’. West of what? *Of the mainland*. We speak of a body of water not on its own terms, but we define it by *our* way of seeing. ‘Vestfjord’ – that tells us nothing of this water’s tastes, or of its sounds, or of its peculiar meaning to the few herring who survived the human-induced breakdown of their peoples, and who found shelter in the great, cold canyons that plunge down underneath the water surface, somewhere between steep walls of rock that rise abruptly out of the water, and into another world.

disheartening and uplifting. I found a vibrant tourism industry to which whale is an abstract object, a defined ‘thing’ that is being robbed again and again of its unfathomable *wildness*. But amidst this dictatorship of technology I also found a concentrated accumulation of thirst, of yearning, of energy. *We want to tune in to the symphony*. That, indeed, is a promising beginning.

The meaning of our question lies not so much in its precise wording as in its implicit methodological stance: The question educates us – and we understand education in its primordial meaning as ‘leading forth’, as ‘inducing’, as ‘being a midwife at the birth of something’ – to be more skeptical towards received ‘truths’. Any question, persistently enough posed, can unfold our awareness toward a panorama of further questions, and of inconsistencies in old habits, and, yes, of new ways to go.



SO THIS IS IT, THEN? CAN WE CALL IT A DAY? WRAP UP OUR BUNDLE, SHALL WE?
..... Well actually, no.

We are not quite there yet. We might have succeeded in setting ourselves in motion. But as we were traveling, another question has grown in importance. Now that we have succeeded in transforming an *unheard silence* into a *heard silence*, we ask ourselves: Dare we go one step further? Now that we are slowly beginning to *hear silence*, we wonder: Can we begin simply – to *hear*?

‘The lantern tinkles on an on; the signs are plentiful. We want to tune in to the symphony. Our search continues: How?’

Indeed. How?

All previous chapters have shared one mutual point of reference, the guiding question. But the orientation that the question has offered so far has at best been detached, vague. Until now, its only function has been to localize the horizon within which we can address the problem of others more directly. It has been instrumental in opening up a problem that was easy to overlook at the outset of

this journey. The question has merely served to create the resonance that would let the silence of others echo more palpably through these pages. In this, it has been successful. It has induced us to develop a skeptical stance towards what appeared like a straightforward discourse in the beginning. When I first began asking the question, I believed that this was all there was to it. I believed that to kindle this skeptical stance was the furthest it would take me. I tacitly accepted Nagel's 'No!' for want of evidence in favor of its negation.

But in the course of my work, this midwife to skepticism has turned upon itself!

As I was exploring the silencing of others in ecological ethics and our speaking practices, and as I found a kindred form of silencing in the tourism industry, the focus of my work shifted. What had started as *advertising* skepticism inevitably turned into *practicing* it. The methodological stance I was fleshing out throughout these chapters educated me to reassess this seemingly obvious intuition that I shared with Nagel, this definite 'No!'. How may we begin to tune in on the silences? Perhaps our guiding question carries a key to this crucial 'how', after all.

'Can we speak about the way others experience?' Let us try, tentatively, carefully, a different answer:

Yes.



THE SLEIGHT-OF-HAND MAGICIAN AND PHENOMENOLOGIST DAVID ABRAM recalls an episode from his stay with a Sherpa *dzankri* in the Khumbu region in Nepal. Abram had climbed onto a large boulder overlooking a dry Himalayan valley to look at red and white lichens that lived on the boulder, and to rest from a several day's hike down from the higher yak pastures. Sitting there, he began to do a simple sleight-of-hand exercise with a silver coin, rolling it through his fingers repetitively. As the coin was dancing through Abram's fingers, it reflected the sunlight into the valley. A lammergeier condor was infused with curiosity and drifted nearer. It came closer and closer until at last, the enormous

bird was floating directly above Abram's head, looking down onto the stranger. Abram writes: "My fingers were frozen, unable to move; the coin dropped out of my hand. And then I felt myself stripped naked by an alien gaze infinitely more lucid and precise than my own. I do not know for how long I was transfixed, only that I felt the air streaming past naked knees and heard the wind whispering in my feathers long after the Visitor had departed." (1996:24)

What is happening here?

A profound shift is taking place in very short citation. This shift happens with the speed of intuition; it passes so quickly and so smoothly that even as our eyes flow with the letters, even as our mind lags behind and gets caught up in what still seems to be an irrational contradiction, *something in us* is inclined to accept this transition. Even as alarm bells sound in our puzzled mind, even as Nagel's 'No!' continues to dig its claws into the flesh of our mind and to fight hard against being washed away, *our limbs are strangely stirred by this episode*.

What is happening here?

It is easy to image a commentator who would attack Abram for cultivating 'mere idiosyncrasy', for 'anthropomorphizing', or for letting his imagination 'run riot'. This is, after all, what Nagel's 'No!' lets us imply. But such critique would do no justice to Abram. For, as Abram expresses, the style of writing that he explores "is simply the most precise and parsimonious way to articulate the things *as we spontaneously perceive them*, prior to all our conceptualizations and definitions." (1996:56) Precise and parsimonious. Let's keep that in mind.

The work of David Abram directs our attention to events of *perception*. Abram, in lively exchange with his predecessor and intellectual godfather, the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, shows how events of perception are deeply participatory encounters between a perceiver and its perceived. So if we wish to be able to say what is happening in the episode above – if we wish to find evidence in favor of our fumbling *Yes* –, then we must turn towards the event of perception. Neither Abram nor Merleau-Ponty have given us this *Yes* directly. So we must look at their work carefully in search of useful traces.

Losing our minds

The phenomenology of perception parts with the long tradition of dualistic thinking. It was René Descartes (in: *Meditations*, 1641) who introduced the ontological split between a *res extensa*, or a purely mechanical realm of ‘extended stuff’, and the *res cogitans*, or a purely mental realm of ‘thinking stuff’. According to Descartes, the human intellect, or soul, is the dwelling of the *res cogitans*; all else, even our own bodies, is confined to – and defined by – the *res extensa*. Cartesian dualism sees the thinking mind as independent and fully isolated from all corporeal involvement. Likewise, it allows for no such thing as feeling, sensing, or knowing *outside* the human mind, for there *is* nothing ‘out there’ but the working of a great machine. The famous *cogito ergo sum* leaves no space for relationship or for context; it suggests that the human mind constitutes itself, and that all sense of interdependence with the more-than-human world is accidental. After Descartes, it has become normal to think of ourselves as thinking islands floating in a great, objectifiable, mindless ‘environment’. It has become normal today to depreciate the perception of others; ‘I’ is accessible only to itself; ‘I’ is that pre-defined and dematerialized thought which I have of myself. I am, in Hegel’s words, merely ‘a hole in being’.

Or am I? To Hegel’s words, Merleau-Ponty replies: “I am not [a hole], but a hollow, a fold, which has been made and which can be unmade.” (2006:250) This is crucial: Merleau-Ponty shows that I am in the world, or more precisely still, I am *of* this world, tied to it, an inhabitant of it. I *am* the world, insofar as the world folds and unfolds in fortuitous and unending grace. What lets me inhabit this world is precisely this *body* of mine that has been so deflated in the aftermath of Descartes. “The body”, says Merleau-Ponty, “is our general medium for having a world.” (Ibid. 169) And it is in this body of ours that we may find the evidence we are looking for. One of the most prominent insights we received from Merleau-Ponty and from Abram is that the dissociation of mind and matter has disembodied our embodied minds. It is this *ontological* cut that bears responsibility for the stubborn intuition that there is a fundamental *epistemological* gap between ourselves and others.

With the dissolution of an internal soul, Merleau-Ponty has returned the subject to where it had lingered all along, albeit in a state of exile, and oblivion: to its own body. Thought is no longer purely internal, and the body is no longer the mere sum of its parts that lacks all interior. Thought is in the body; and this same body *thinks itself* through its lively unfolding in the world it always already inhabits, prior to all reflections⁴³. “To be conscious or rather *to be an experience*”, writes Merleau-Ponty, “is to hold inner communication with the world, the body and other people, to be with them instead of being beside them. [It is] being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body” (2006:111/160) The thoughtful body of which Merleau-Ponty speaks is radically open, and an active participant in its own world. It is this most primordial phenomenon of our being-in-the-world that he has called perception. *Perception is participation*. Perception is the continuous and active participation of our bodies with the earth; it is the busy border traffic that flows to and fro; it is, in the words of Abram, a “dynamic blend between creativity and receptivity by which every animate organism necessarily orients itself to the world (and orients the world around itself).” (1996:50)

David Abram traces the loss of our intimacy with this most immediate of phenomena, carnal perception as the interplay between ourselves and the breathing earth, even further back than to the Cartesian dissolution of mind and body. He picks up a scent that Merleau-Ponty had been on before him. Merleau-Ponty had written:

Thought ... does not exist independently of the world and of words. What misleads us in this connection, and causes us to believe in a thought which exists for itself prior to expression, is thought already constituted and expressed, which we can silently recall to ourselves, and through which we acquire the illusion of an inner life. (2006/213).

This ‘thought already constituted’ that creates the ‘illusion of an inner life’ is, as Abram so elegantly uncovers, *the written word*. Abram shows at great length how the emergence of writing, and especially of phonetic writing, was a major factor that shifted our perception, and subsequently our conceptualizations, from

⁴³ Edmund Husserl coined the term ‘lifeworld’ (Lebenswelt) for just this inherence of ourselves in the world. Towards the end of his life, Husserl foretold that the lifeworld was to become the central theme of phenomenology.

direct carnal involvement to a participation increasingly occupied with ‘thoughts already constituted’. As we became more and more occupied by the accumulating written accounts of our own kind, the speech of trees and mountains and rivers – animate powers who had spoken so vividly to our indigenous forebears – increasingly waned into silence. Abram shows, among other things, how this transition took place precisely at a time and place we now consider to be the advent of Western philosophy, namely in the Athens of Plato and his students. According to Abram, the new technology allowed Plato’s teacher Socrates to detach previously ephemeral qualities such as ‘justice’ or ‘goodness’ from their storied inherence in particular situations and places. Plato himself expanded this abstraction beyond such ephemeral qualities to *all* general terms: It was the new technology, writing, that gave way to Plato’s ‘pure Ideas’ (*eidōs*)! One cannot, in Plato’s view, have true knowledge of this particular formation of clouds that drifts past these particular woodlands this overcast spring morning. Instead, one can only have true knowledge of the pure idea ‘cloud’. Pure ideas as such, eternally unchanging as they are, are inaccessible to our senses. They inhabit a realm beyond our bodies. As Abram goes on to point out, this “capacity to view and even to dialogue with one’s own words after writing them down, or even in the process of writing them down, enables a new sense of autonomy and independence from others.” (1996:112) This new autonomous self – which has gained a “timeless quality” (Ibid.)⁴⁴ through its ability to reflect on pure, unchanging ideas – has been called *psychē* by Socrates. Abram concludes his deliberations:

For Plato and for Socrates, the *psychē* is now that aspect of oneself that is refined and strengthened by turning away from the ordinary sensory world in order to contemplate the intelligible Ideas, the pure and eternal forms that, alone, truly exist. The Socratic-Platonic *psychē*, in other words, is none other than the literate intellect, that part of the self that is born and strengthened in relation to the written letters. (Ibid.:113)

Thus, *eidōs* and *psychē* became the first two children of this new technology, phonetic writing. Together they inaugurated an escalating estrangement of our breathing bodies with their mutable moods from this one breathing earth and its mutable moods.

⁴⁴ This crucial observation brings Abram strikingly close to the work of Martin Heidegger, who himself never did become aware of the importance of this one particular technology, writing, for the subsequent triumph of a static and constant presence over radically temporal being.

Of a world that speaks

Merleau-Ponty and Abram disclose the perceptual world as a deeply *animate realm*. In our most immediate experience of things, they show themselves as active and animate interlocutors that claim our attention, and that negotiate the terms of our mutual encounter together with us. Before technology begins to mediate our sensual reciprocity with the land – be it writing, photography, films, or any other form of technology –, everything has the power of speech. Before these exclusively human-made animate powers dictate our reciprocal perception into their predictable patterns, every leaf and spider and scent in the air teases our animal senses. Before we reflect about it and abstract it, *the world always already speaks to us*.

Throughout his book *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty whispers inconspicuously of this animate power of the earth. Things ‘summon’ our awareness; one part of the landscape ‘comes to life’ while others ‘recede’ into the periphery of my vision and ‘become dormant’; a lamp ‘shows’ one particular face to me and another to the chimney behind the lamp; our bodies respond to ‘the call’ of other bodies; colors ‘invade the eye’, ‘bring a peaceful state’, or ‘make no demands on us’. These events do not leave our sensing bodies unaltered. Their touching, their sighing, their susurrations resounds in our bodies; we are being ‘filled with wonder’ by these animate powers; they let our bodies drink from their wells, they endow us with ever new sediments of experience which we may embed into our scorching flesh, and each communion reconstitutes the entirety of the participatory exchange between perceiver and perceived. *Sensation is*, as Merleau-Ponty shows us, *a reconstitution*. In beautiful prose, he illustrates this:

Blue is that which prompts me to look in a certain way, that which allows my gaze to run over it in a specific manner. It is a certain field or atmosphere presented to the power of my eyes and my whole body. ... Thus a sensible datum which is on the point of being felt sets a kind of muddled problem for my body to solve. I must find the attitude which will provide it with the means of becoming determinate, of showing up as blue; I must find the reply to a question which is obscurely expressed. And yet I do so only when I am invited by it, my attitude is never sufficient to make me really see blue or really touch a hard surface. The sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place. As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not *set over against* it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought ... I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it ‘thinks itself within me’, I am the sky

itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself, my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue. (2006:244/249)

In a chapter called “The Flesh of Language”, Abram carries this new sensitivity for an animate earth into what may be the last stronghold of an ostensible human uniqueness – language. Abram deconstructs the now dominating view of language as something that merely *represents* the sensible world in a set of arbitrary and internal codes, codes that are essentially removed from the things they signify. Abram *incorporates* this view of language into that more physical layer of expression which is not commonly thought of as ‘language proper’, the layer of tones and gestures and rhythms and resonance. He argues at length that these sensuous and evocative qualities are the most primary dimension of our languages, and that it is at these layers where our languages are most directly being informed by the animate powers that dwell in our vicinity. To make this thought more immediately tactile, Abram adopts Merleau-Ponty’s image of the *flesh of the world*, an image that describes a “dynamic and interconnected reality that provokes and sustains all our speaking, lending something of its structure to all our various languages. The enigmatic nature of language echoes and ‘prolongs unto the invisible’ the wild, interpenetrating, interdependent nature of the sensible landscape itself.” (1996:85) It is this richly animate and fleshly world, then, rather than our human body alone, that “provides the deep structure of our language” (Ibid.), because at every moment of our lives we are being drawn into conversation by those other animate powers that envelop us – by falcon, moon, or withering leaves.

Abram acknowledges that any linguistic community does secrete a certain perceptual boundary between itself and the sensuous land. What is important, however, is that this boundary is not originally sealed and solidified, but that it is a porous and permeable membrane which enables rather than disables exchanges between the human community and the more-than-human land. Language does *not* reside in humans alone, and the entirety of human intercourse is, once more, but a brief melody in the great symphony of the living earth. Abram describes

how this membrane is being kept open and alive – how our melodies are being kept in tune – by many oral, indigenous peoples even today:

[T]he membrane enacted by their language is felt, and is acknowledged as a margin of danger and magic, a place where the relations between the human and more-than-human worlds must be continually negotiated. The shamans common to oral cultures dwell precisely on this margin or edge; the primary role of such magicians ... is to act as intermediaries between the human and more-than-human realms. By regularly shedding the sensory constraints induced by a common language, periodically dissolving the perceptual boundary in order to directly encounter, converse, and bargain with various nonhuman intelligences – with otter, or owl, or eland – and then rejoining the common discourse, the shaman keeps the human discourse from rigidifying, and keeps the perceptual membrane fluid and porous, ensuring the greatest possible attunement between the human community and the animate earth, between the familiar and the fathomless. (Ibid.:256)

It was not until the triumph of phonetic writing systems that our languages became what Abram admirably describes as “a hall of mirrors.” (Ibid.:257)

Our embodied minds are always already *speaking to* the world. It is merely a belief of rather recent origin that we are only *speaking about* it.

In the theater of the senses: *Synaesthesia*

One frigid January afternoon, I went for a stroll along the frozen lakeshore by my cabin home, thinking of earlier visits to this place, thinking of what food I would prepare after I'd come back home, thinking a whole jolly succession of loosely coupled thoughts. As I scrambled through the undergrowth, I suddenly heard a faint squeaky sound. And again. My feet halted in their steps, my breathing quieted, and my wandering eyes searched the scrub. So high in pitch were the squeaks that I could barely sense them as sounds at all. Were they coming from inside of me, or were they the result of wood chafing on wood, or of the frozen air working the ice? Now all fell silent. Led by my biding ears, my whole posture became that of unfocused yet intent expectation. And since my ears had been spoken to most directly, it was my ears that congregated all other senses around themselves: My entire body was now listening. Nostrils widened, irises dilated, thoughts converged, and knees swayed gently to and fro. All was alert and out of focus, listening, listening. Until a soft swish down by the edge of the ice lured me into focus. Immediately my head and shoulder shifted their balance towards the sound. Even as my eyes were turning, they zoomed in and were captured by a

tiny shadow that darted along underneath the ice. By now vision had taken the lead over the other senses, and receptive questioning shifted into animated tracking ...

Any ordinary event of perception, if only paid close enough attention to, will impress on us a fair understanding of what Merleau-Ponty and Abram mean when they describe perception not only as a participatory event between ourselves and other animate powers, but also as an *synaesthetic event*. While each of our senses – vision, hearing, smell, touch, or taste – is a distinct modality in its own right, these singular modalities are bound to let themselves be drawn into confluence by the thing we are perceiving. We do not, in unreflected everyday experience, separate sharply between these individual modalities. Our sensual involvement in the perceptual world much rather fluctuates from one state of synaesthetic coherence to another. My ears had been invaded by those squeaky sounds earliest, but almost immediately, all other senses tagged along. Not knowing exactly what to charge after, they queued behind my hearing, for here was the best – and only – trace. Food and earlier visits and the felt texture of the trail below my feet all evaporated, and only one thing remained in my mindful body: that sound, that mystery. Every nerve and fiber of me reached out into the unknown via a synaesthetic state of listening, and when that squeak returned, all my senses fell towards it like splinters of metal fall towards a strong magnet, meeting *over there*, completing my porous body, this “open circuit” (Ibid.:125), in what had now changed into a tiny squeaking shadow. Even as my senses commingled in that shadow, they reshuffled instantly, vision now reclaiming its habitual pre-eminence over the circuit, swinging myself into a synaesthetic state of watching.

Synaesthetic experiences like this one let us see how we communicate with others through our sensory functions. Our perspective views are not independent of one another, but, with Merleau-Ponty, they “slip into each other and are brought together finally in the thing.” (2006:411) It is this ongoing communication that makes our mouths water when we see a child who digs its mouth into the red flesh of a ripe, juicy, sweet water melon, or that makes us feel

a prickle in the soft flesh of our own elbow when we watch another blood donor's vein being tapped by a long, thick, steely syringe. Or rather, in a strange way, we feel that trickle not in our own elbow, but *over there*, in the other's flesh.⁴⁵

The problem of others is merely a problem of horizons

To learn to speak with others in the way Abram speaks with the lammergeier is to grow deeper into the entirety of our embodied minds, and through our embodied minds to grow deeper into the textures of the living land. It is to rejuvenate our perceptions, to retrain our neglected and vestigial senses, and to allow the capricious moods of the land to inundate our porous skins. If I am a fold of this one world, why, then, should it be altogether impossible for me to speak meaningfully about other folds in this same world?

Synaesthesia stretches beyond mere *individual* synaesthesia. "In reality", writes Merleau-Ponty, "the other is not shut up inside my perspective of the world, because this perspective itself has no definite limits, because it slips spontaneously into the other's, and because both are brought together in the one single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception." (2006:411) Synaesthesia happens as much within my own body as it happens within the flesh of the world. Each synaesthetic event is a reaching out of flesh to flesh. We find more evidence in Abram's writing still:

It is thus that a raven's soaring in the distance is not, for me, a mere visual image; as I follow it with my eyes, I inevitably feel the stretch and flex of its wings with my own muscles, and its sudden swoop toward the nearby tree is a visceral as well as visual experience for me. The raven's loud, guttural cry, as it swerves overhead, is not circumscribed within a strictly audible field – it echoes *through* the visible, immediately animating the visible landscape with the reckless style or mood proper to that jet black shape. My various senses, diverging as they do from a single, coherent body, coherently *converge*, as well, in the perceived thing, just as the separate perspectives of my two eyes converge upon the raven and convene there into a single focus. My senses connect up with each other in the things I perceive, or rather each perceived

⁴⁵ The same phenomenon also casts a new light onto our Lofoten adventure. Here we found a specific form of perception largely predefined by earlier images, and by the promises and expectations to retrieve such images from the deep, cold waters of Vestfjord at arbitrary demand. This predefinition of the entire perceptual circuit into a narrow frame within a single modality, vision, showed itself to be, if not all-exclusive, then at least fiercely self-propelling. In other words, while I had no way of looking *into* every visitor and hearing how they actually experienced their visit, it was apparent that the very machinery called 'conventional whale watching', of which every visitor made themselves a motor through their mere presence, was designed around this singular perceptual modality.

thing gathers my senses together in a coherent way, and it is this that enables me to experience the thing itself as a center of forces, as another nexus of experience, as an Other. (1996:62)

Every external perception immediately resonates as a peculiar perception within my own body. Vice versa, every perception of my own body casts a peculiar expressiveness into the world, an expressiveness which communicates itself to other perceiving bodies. When we thus perceive another body, we *re-enact* that otherness in our own flesh. In the excerpt above, Abram does not reason by analogy. He sooner re-enacts the raven's flight in his own flesh, much as he reenacted the gaze of the Himalayan lammergeier through his own body. Merleau-Ponty gives us a quite different example of the same event:

A baby of fifteen months opens its mouth if I playfully take one of its fingers between my teeth and pretend to bite it. And yet it has scarcely looked at its face in a glass, and its teeth are not in any case like mine. The fact that its own mouth and teeth, as it feels them from the inside, are immediately, for it, an apparatus to bite with, and my jaws, as the baby sees it from the outside, is immediately, for it, capable of the same intentions. 'Biting' has immediately, for it, an intersubjective significance. It perceives its intentions in its body, and my body with its own, and thereby my intentions in its own body. (Ibid.:410)

Phenomenology teaches us that the beginning and end of all knowledge is a horizon of meaning. Meaning is cultivated within this horizon through our agitated and tireless senses, who cannot help but set out into the world, return with tidings, and set out once more. All the while we live, and grow, and change, and all the while we reflect our changing meaning back onto the world. We act and reenact in endless succession. And the knowledge we thus gain of the world is a function both of our carnal experiencing and of external 'reality', at any one moment simultaneously limited *and* enabled by our horizons.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960), has coined the useful term 'merging of horizons' (*Horizontverschmelzung*). To reenact others' experience means to get to *know* those others. And to *know* others no longer means to fully leave behind my own experiencing. It no longer means that my mind or imagination slips out of my own skin and into the skin of that other. For such a thing has become impossible, now that phenomenology has helped the mind back into its own flesh. To get to know others rather means that we bring our own horizons into proximity to those of others in an open-ended hermeneutical spiral. It means that we enter into a world of difference which is

not entirely alien from our own. It means that we cause a mutual friction that may assist us in merging, ever so tentatively, ever so partially, our own horizons with others, and that we awaken to the rich meanings that travel towards us via the tail slaps of the killer whale, or the song of the mockingbird, or the amber waves of wind-touched grain. Merleau-Ponty:

[O]ur body is ... a grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium. Sometimes a new cluster of meanings is formed; our former movements are integrated into a fresh motor entity, the first visual data into a fresh sensory entity, our natural powers suddenly come together in a richer meaning, which hitherto has been merely foreshadowed in our perceptual or practical field, and which has made itself felt in our experience by no more than a certain lack ... (2006:177).

We have felt such a certain lack throughout all these pages. We called it *silence*. But as we are slowly beginning to get a taste of our new answer to the old question, we will let this word go. May it dissolve amidst croaking toads and quacking ducks, gushing streams and rumbling thunders. We no longer need to strain the word, for in its place we are beginning to hear our own heartbeat, and snowflakes as they settle onto sleeping willows. We no longer *know* the word, for in its place we are beginning to know of other things. We are beginning to know that to see is to be seen, to touch is to be touched, to hear to be heard, and to speak to be spoken to.

... That frigid January afternoon by the lake, my watching body caught sight of two mice who were chasing one another *underneath the ice*. I stood a few feet away and dared not move. Gulliver had arrived in the land of Lilliput and found that he really was a colossus. One mouse found a hole in the ice and emerged to the other world above. Up the slope he scurried. But what was all flat and even *ground* from my towering height was a *terrain* for the little creature, perforated with crevices and tunnels between twigs and pebbles or underneath last autumn's decaying leaves, a terrain through which mouse drifted with the confidence of the somnambulist. Until he resurfaced from one such passageway – and stumbled right upon my left boot. Mouse halted in his step. Tiny whiskers twitched in frozen air. The giant visitor did not move. Wind lamented in spruces above our heads. A breeze of cold stroked the tail and made it shiver. Somewhere in the

middle of lake, the built-up tension in the ice could bear no more and released itself in a profound, reverberating boom. I awoke. He awoke. We scurried apart. The last I remember were the distant and dreamlike peeps and chirps as they ebbed away into the many-voiced afternoon.

Inconsistency?

Some readers might still be uncomfortable with this provisional *Yes*. These readers will be inclined to accuse me of inconsistency, and, having made the effort to seek, they will find evidence for their cause (which was bound to happen, as the Bible knows already). They will say: ‘Your relational language use is truly trying our patience at times. First you likened “experiencing” to “living”, then you said that “Gaia experiences”, then you went on to say that “Yes, through our sensing bodies we may reenact the way others experience”. But you oversaw that all these assertions combined make for a resplendent inconsistency: It would simply be stretching the words beyond recognition to say something like “I can sense how Gaia experiences”, for there are endlessly more differences between the two ways of experiencing than there are similarities, or are there not?’ This would be a valuable observation indeed, but alas, it would be unsound, were it brought forth as an accusation. The reader’s comment would be valuable insofar as it reveals how relational language use *cannot avoid* creating contradictions, ambiguities, paradoxes. But the problem with the critique above is that it draws one arbitrary line through a maze, then looks only at that line to criticize the maze in its entirety. Relational language creates gravitational fields of meaning, fields that pulse stronger in the center and grow fainter towards the edges. *Of course* our own empathy with another node of experiencing will be less and less focused, the further that other experience is removed from our own. *Of course* our mindful bodies will not be able to reenact Gaia’s experiencing in the same way in which it reenacts another human’s experiencing, or a whale’s, or a bat’s. Yet to say the opposite has never been the intention. I simply wished to show that there is no *principal* epistemological chasm between ourselves and others, but, once again, that there are merely horizons.

But when we have accepted these horizons, then, indeed, we are free once more to wonder what it can mean to say: ‘Gaia experiences’. We are free once more to let our sensing bodies weave webs of meaning with the unfolding earth itself. But we will keep Abram’s warning in mind: let us be parsimonious, and let us be precise.

The tinkling subsides

In the previous chapter we saw how the Old Greek word *poiêsis* had two distinct modes, *phusis*, or that which emerges from itself while at the same time withdrawing back into concealment, and *technê*, or that which is brought forth by the artisan or artist. We have pondered closely these semantic differences and their implications for the role of modern technology. What we have largely left aside, though, is that aspect which *unites* the two, namely *poiêsis*. As this thesis is coming to an end, we will now close this gap. We will return to *poiêsis*.

Heidegger has reminded us that *poiêsis* means ‘bringing forth’, and he has also shown us where the most worthy heir of this bringing forth resides: *Poiêsis* lives on in our modern word ‘poetry’. Now, if we may leave aside for a moment all our modern assumptions of what poetry means to us – if we ignore such things as rhyme, meter, verse, stanza, figures of speech, the question of taste, or of what constitutes ‘good poetry’ –, if we clear our senses of all these later amendments, then we may begin to sense the rich and veritable heritage that has been carried to us through the changing epochs by this small word, *poetry*.

In its most primordial sense, poetry is simply a bringing forth. Poetry is a midwife of being; it is that which attunes our senses to the events taking place here and now. Vice versa, poetry is also that which emerges from our attuned involvement with those events. Such poetry is no individual oddity; it is no random curiosity; it is neither ‘style’ nor ‘genre’; it is by no means limited to the written page, nor is it more generally limited to human conversing. Attitude we may call it, or method. Poetry is a particular state of bodily mind, a corporeal attunement to the unfolding events in which we live our lives. But perhaps this is still not accurate enough: Poetry is not a state, but a *process* of embodied mind; it

is not an attunement, but a corporeal *attuning* to the unfolding events of this animate earth in which we live our lives. It is that which we may still hear in the direct German translation of the word, *Dichten*: Poetry is the attitude which *condenses* fleeting fragments of this one world into temporary centers. It is what *summons* haphazard forces into meaningful nodes – nodes that are filled to the rim with meaning. The poetic attitude is, in short, another form of synaesthesia: We allow our sensing bodies and the sensing earth to converge, and together to join into the unending and inexhaustible creation of this multicentric symphony.

We have asked ourselves, on and on again, how can we tune in to the symphony? How do we tap those energies clogged up inside of us, that yearning that expressed itself so clearly in the untamed events off the Lofoten coastline? Nothing less than a profound change of attitude will do. The attitude we strive for has relinquished the ancient reverie of human specialness and its ferocious child, human dominion. This attitude expresses itself in humility, in curiosity, in skepticism. It resonates in Arne Næss's beautifully simple words 'stans og iakkta', or *pause and pay heed*. If we were to name this attitude, we would once more choose a simple name, a telling name that can tell its very own story. What would we call it? *The poetry of leisure*. For 'leisure' is the 'freedom or opportunity to do something'. And the poetry of leisure is an attitude which actively invites opportunities to let things be themselves. It creates the freedom of communing with others on terms not preconceived, but harmonized anew during each singular and inimitable encounter. The poetry of leisure practices relational language, and in doing so remains wary of the powerful agency of our languages. It listens, and it hears voices everywhere. It hones our animal senses; it rejuvenates our fluid and carnal involvement; it connects us to this vast communicate realm in which we are at home. And it finds elation in the thought that all our knowledge of this one world will always remain partial, temporary, imperfect.

Postscript

Becoming indigenous

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

- T.S. Eliot -



WHEN WE SPEAK OF ‘INDIGENOUS PEOPLES’ WE WILL MOST OFTEN THINK OF peoples outside our own sphere, outside this ‘Western civilization’. We will think of the First Nations of North America, or of the Sami who inhabit the northernmost tundra plains of the Scandinavian peninsula. We will think of the Aborigines, of course, or of the tribal peoples who dwell in the rain forest of the great Amazonas basin. We will think of others.

But will we think of ourselves?

The word ‘indigenous’ has a very simple meaning. It means ‘of a place’. So when we have such a hard time calling ourselves indigenous, then we are attesting to ourselves simply this: We have, collectively, become estranged from the places we inhabit.

This thesis began as an allegory. Both the mountain and the island were a metaphor, as was the vast ocean into which we steered. Together they shaped the allegory of the journey. *But neither mountain nor island nor ocean were actual places.* All were, in the most direct meaning of the word, u-topian.

That we gave so much room to the allegory was useful. The metaphor of the mountain proved an illustrative tool to develop the central ideas of concentric

ecological ethics. Its transmutation into the 'human island' furthermore explicated the stark limitations of this project: Even though concentric ethics seeks to *expand* direct moral obligations, the discourse must continue to rebound to its most deeply-lying, and most original, problem: its single-centeredness. This problem can only be faced if we turn our attention to the awe-inspiring otherness of this one world. Hence the voyage.

But the allegory was not only useful. *It was also inevitable.* We cautioned the reader early on that this thesis has been tended to from its inception to grow into a unified and organic whole, and that it cannot be read with a dissective attitude. To dismember this thesis of the allegory, in the hope that the arguments would come forth more directly, would invalidate the thesis as a whole. For there is more to the allegory than we have considered so far.

The concentric paradigm still dominant in ecological ethics could only be retold with the use of an allegory because this paradigm is essentially cut off from the places that always already sustain it. There are no particular, living places into which the concentric story can be meaningfully bedded. We cannot visit it; we cannot sense it. Why? Because that story has unfolded from a utopia, a non-place strictly defined by arbitrary human judgment.

But there is more still to our allegory. From its beginning, it was designed to expose a pathway from our utopian seclusion into the living locales of this one world. The clues were there all along. The dots only needed to be connected.

There is a precise vantage point at which the allegory has turned into a lived story: *It is the discovery of the horizon.* For when we first discovered the horizon at the top of the utopian mountain, we had stumbled upon the particular membrane that connects us to this world. From there on, the journey has been an exploration of this membrane, and of ways to give speech to it.

So now that the pathway from the utopian allegory into the living world has been exposed, there is no more need for the allegory. In the end, the earth itself has

become the nourishing ground for our stories. The air itself has become the primary medium through which these stories travel.

When I started working on this thesis, I knew not what this transition might actually mean. I was aware *that* it would need to take place, but just where it would take me, I could not see. And as many of us often do when we have a hard time seeing clearly, I strained my eyes and tried to look far. Of old I have been spellbound by the sea, and by these wondrous creatures whose forefathers, lung-breathers like ourselves, are believed to have returned to this cradle of life some fifty million years ago. Before this research project, I had only very occasionally come close to free, living whales. Each of those earlier encounters had emerged out of chance – I had never before *tried* to be close to whales –, and although each had passed quickly, these few moments continue to occupy a living space in the shifting webbing of my storied life. Now that I was pondering ways to emerge out of the utopian allegory, I thought: Why not begin by letting myself be drawn in more closely by this old and ever orbiting spell?

Not having brought along a hypothesis, but ‘merely’ curiosity, I was very busy keeping a journal during my stay on the Henningsvær archipelago. *Everything* seemed important. And if I look through my notes from those weeks today, I know why: *A place was speaking through me*. I do not mean this metaphorically. So let me add: *And my body responded*. Not only do I find in these notes minute descriptions of the flights of herons, or of the ceremonial dance between clouds and mountains, or of the excursions of a limping fox, or of the omnipresent hissing and rolling and whispering and surging of the surf. Not only are there paragraphs of ecstasy jotted down under the influence of *Aurora borealis*, and paragraphs of anxiety scribbled while the full-moon tide was sighing achingly around the timber pillars of our cabin. If I look at all these notes now, I also find something else: The lower the sun climbed above the horizon, – the more this place receded into its winter gloom – the more my body became dazed and weary. I had slept no more than five hours per night when I first arrived, but I had no problems sleeping eleven or more by the time I was getting ready to leave. As the weeks passed and the sun just barely scratched the

horizon anymore, my notes became less frequent, less meticulous, and shorter. At the same time, they became more and more occupied by the moon's journey, and the weather, and all those creatures I came across ... The place itself was gradually drawing me into an intimate conversation, enchanting my senses with its revolving lullaby. And while the precise fabric of this archipelago slowly penetrated my moods and honed the texture of my sensations, the utopian allegory began to shift quietly, unhurriedly, into the narrative of a place.

But this is not quite the end of the story.

Not only did I experience how the place spoke with me, and how it spoke through me. I also experienced how this same place was being *disturbed* by the indefatigable mass tourism industry. And I experienced how at times, despite my wish to think otherwise, I could not separate this *disturbance* from my own *involvement*. I was there, after all, when these creatures were being robbed of yet another day they might have spent foraging and eating, or introducing their newborns to their echoing kindergartens, or reacquainting themselves with old relations.

The conversation with the Henningsvær archipelago was my first step out of the utopian allegory. But what I did not know at first: It was only the overture.

The two very different arenas of experience to which I had exposed myself on that journey – the speaking place, and its intrusion and silencing by scores of people *who were also in search* – together brought me to the very brink of the actual leap from the utopia back into the one world: *That the world we inhabit is always local*. We need not go far in search of otherness. The multi-centric, speaking earth is always already here. Right now. Right here.

If I may use the word 'outcome', then I will use it here. To have taken this leap is the lasting outcome of my work. But this out-come is as much an in-come. I have *come out* of the utopian story, and I have *gone out* to the home of killer whale. But in the end, at the near completion of a full solar cycle during which this journey has claimed my attention, I have *come in* to the very place where I live. I have found that a quiet and patient interlocutor has been there all along,

humming its tunes around me, lending its air to the fabric of these pages, awaiting my return during my long *absense*: Bloksberg, the place where I live.



AS I AM WRITING THIS, SPRING IS RETURNING TO THIS FOREST CLEARING, AND the place is itching with restlessness. The sun rises two hours before my habitual winter wake-up time, and I find myself lying in bed, wide awake and waiting, wondering what I am waiting for. I cannot lie still, so I slip into a wool sweater and go outside. Hosts of chattering magpies overflow with energy, and finches and tits rhapsodize from the highest branches. Their songs ebb around me as I walk. Days of mild and dew-drenched air have softened the soil, and starlings and thrushes have come from afar to hold an impassioned banquet in the mud. A few spots of crusty snow still endure on northern slopes and in the shades of ancient junipers, and the first yellow blossoms of coltsfoot greet me from their abodes on southern slopes. A bumblebee queen has awoken from her hibernation and seems to be searching for a suitable nest site. Shoots of wild chives haste to emerge from amidst their decaying forebears, and the four deer who struggled hard through the cold season now stretch lazily over where the sun speckles the forest edge with light. A flock of mallards swishes past me and swoops down towards the brook. The banks are flooded after the thaw. Freshly felled alders tell me that the beavers are out and about. The merry honking of geese fills the air. All these fractured tunes enthrall my ears. Wrinkles and bumps in the stirring ground confer with my feet. Bypassing whiffs engage my nose. My eyes and skin expand in quiet recognition of the sunbeams' solicitation. My lungs draw in the outside air and breathe out the inside air. I walk, I breathe, I smell, I taste, and all the while I shed the dull and dark season like a winter coat. My presence flows with the pulse of this place; my mindful body is saturated in its metamorphoses; my embodied mind spins forth the awakening that permeates from the pores of this forest clearing. Here is an estuary of spring, and it is here that the awaking

place ‘thinks itself within me’. All things here are animate, everything speaks. And I am a perpetual learner of curious tongues.

When I return, I start preparing breakfast. Eggs bounce in the boiling water, and honey melts through steaming toast. The fire in the oven just caught a good air current; I hear it blaze exultantly. Open books and unfinished notes on the table in the other room beg for my attention. The repetitive and predictable smells and sounds and feels of my cabin request my full awareness, and habit facilitates their lure. The symphony wanes into silence again. Sensuous *presense* turns to nonsensical *absense* once more. I start to forget.

The cabin wall begins to tremble. Vibrations wander from the wall into my feet. I pause to wonder. Do I *feel* or do I *hear* this tremor? I cannot tell. Now it is quiet again. I lay my palms against the wall; I wait. The trembling returns. I know not whence it comes, but my limbs are strangely stirred. I tiptoe around; my heart is pounding. *Thump, thump, thump*, it goes. Within me or without? Perhaps it’s both, or neither. *Thump, thump, thump*. What came first, my pounding heart or the shudder in the wall? *Thump, thump, thump*. Why am I so mesmerized?

My eyes wander through the room. Nothing here speaks to me now, nothing engages me like it did only moments before. All is keeping quiet; all is keeping alert. All seems to be, once more, listening.

Out of the periphery of my eyes I catch a minute movement that comes through the window from outside. I turn to look more closely; it takes me a moment to focus. Then I see him. The great spotted woodpecker. He is perhaps thirty meters away, over on the other side of the dirt road. He is pecking hard and loud against the sheet metal top of an energy post, full of vim and vigor, and quite obviously thrilled with anticipation that his proud *thump, thump, thump* will arouse a mate.

Once more I am reminded of the continuous reciprocity between myself and this land, and of our boundless conversing.



SO IS *THIS* THE END?

Well actually, no.

Merleau-Ponty reminds and cautions us that philosophy is an ever-renewed experiment in making its own beginning. I have journeyed far only to find that I have been here all along. But I have only just begun to marvel at this enigma:

here.

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