Grounding Words and Flights of Imagination

What's in a name? Can we be so sure that a rose by any other name *would* smell as sweet? Or that its sweetness would have the same significance? Words focus and shape our thoughts, values and even perceptions. When it comes to thinking through and cultivating appropriate relationships with our environment, the power of words has long been recognised. The rhetoric of works like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* began the modern environmental movement when more straightforward accounts of the state of the world, when they existed, failed to connect to lived experience and to capture the imagination (Waddell, 2000).

The power to name is also a battle ground in environmental struggles. Many of us can recall the sudden ground shift that occurred when 'global warming' became 'climate change'. This was not simply a cool-headed move to a more 'scientifically accurate' designation, as was often claimed. It was, in part, a deliberate move to take the heat out of the issue by giving the situation a less threatening name (Poole, 2006). More positively, struggles can be transformed by renaming, often drawing on marginalized vocabularies. Concerns about non-native species, for example, can be described in terms that move away from metaphors of invasion and war towards caring for the health of the existing environment (Bach and Larson, 2017). Emerging movements often try to define the terms in which their concerns are understood, but it is important to remember that even new paradigms must be articulated using words that bring with them their own history and are thus not entirely under our control. As Nietzsche aptly put it, 'only something which has no history can be defined.' (Nietzsche, 2007: 53) This can be problematic, leading to confusion and miscommunication. It can also be liberating, allowing for the recognition of a multiple meanings and perspectives, as is the case with the multiple meanings of 'rewilding' (Gammon, 2018).

In this volume Hoły-Łuczaj makes a powerful intervention in the debate concerning *the* grounding word of environmental concern: nature. The debate has been reignited by Steven Vogel's provocative work advocating a 'post-nature' environmentalism. As Hoły-Łuczaj shows, Vogel's intention is to deconstruct the nature/artefact dichotomy that has dominated interpretations of environmental concern in its modern form. The necessity of this deconstruction is both theoretical and practical: the nature/artefact dichotomy has never made sense and it has narrowed the horizons of environmentalists, so that their thoughts and actions have focussed on mountains, forests and seas rather than malls, restaurants and houses. Hoły-Łuczaj revisits the work of Martin Heidegger to provide support for this deconstructive move and in doing so she furthers our understanding of what Heidegger can contribute to environmental thought and what a 'postnatural' environmentalism might look like. Vogel himself suggests that Heidegger's work on the equipmental manifestation of the world makes

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him an ally of the 'postnatural' view (Vogel, 2015: 52). Heidegger's later work, it might be thought, moves beyond the world of equipment to focus on nature, or *phusis*. That was the view of early interpretations of Heidegger's contribution to environmental thought (Zimmerman, 1983). However, Hoły-Łuczaj shows that this view does not hold up in the light of more recent scholarship. The Greek thinking of *phusis* and *technē* was not, on Heidegger's reading, the dichotomy of nature and artefact. Instead of naming different kinds of thing, *phusis* and *technē* name different aspects of the manifestation of each particular thing. Hoły-Łuczaj's careful reading interprets a number of grounding words in the Heidegger's later work in these terms and she argues that the early analysis of equipment can be understood as continuous with these later ideas. The upshot is an environmental philosophy that concerns itself with making the world into a habitable *home*, instead of one that privileges a certain class of things (the natural ones) and advocates solely on their behalf.

Ultimately, it is still questionable whether we should follow Vogel in his most controversial claim, that environmentalists should give up using the word *nature* altogether. This is likely to be an impossible goal considering how deeply rooted the grounding words of nature and the natural are in the English language and environmentalists' vocabulary in particular. Therefore, some of us have argued that it is possible to rethink nature in terms that avoid the problematic dichotomies Vogel identifies (Greaves, 2016). Manela's article approaches the question from another direction. If we consider first the kind of attitudes and virtues that it is appropriate to have towards 'nature', rather than trying to metaphysically distinguish nature from artefacts, then the problem is not that two class of thing have been separated, but that two kinds of attitude have been inappropriately integrated. To this end Manela partially brackets the questions that the postnatural environmentalists pose by positing an idealised scenario in which 'we' live in a village surrounded by untrammelled nature that provides us with a bounty of necessities and pleasures. This kind of imaginative scenario building has long allowed philosophers to draw attention to fundamental phenomena that tend to get lost in the complexities of real life and historical change; think of Rousseau's description of the 'state of nature.' The question Manela then poses is whether it is appropriate for 'us' to feel gratitude to nature. His response is that it is not. This for two reasons: nature is not the kind of thing to which it is appropriate to feel gratitude, since it does not form intentions; and the virtue of gratitude is a social virtue that is best cultivated in society. The claim of numerous environmental philosophers that it is a virtue to be grateful to nature, and a vice to be ungrateful, is indicative of a problematic anthropomorphism. That anthropomorphism in turn feeds into a model that tries to extend the scope of social virtues to become environmental virtues. Assessing such claims seems to require that we return to the bracketed question nature. Dominic Lenzi has argued that apparently social virtues can be legitimately cultivated towards nature without falling into relativism, if we

maintain a pluralistic understanding of nature (Lenzi, 2017). If Manela is right, then gratitude, at least, is one social virtue that cannot ground an environmental ethic, so we must look elsewhere for such a grounding.

Perhaps we would fare better by returning from the social virtues to the apparently more universal moral idea of *duty*? After all, Immanuel Kant thought that an elucidation of duty could ground the whole metaphysics of morals. Fragnière brings us back to the concrete realities of our current global situation by considering the claims of duty on each individual alive today as we face the onset of catastrophic climate change (aka. Global Warming). What if pursuing my defining life goals and projects entails harming the climate? The dilemma is stark and uncomfortable for many environmentalists in globally affluent situations. Fragnière argues that the demandingness of each individual's climate duty is not such as to require that individual to give up all her life projects to reduce her carbon footprint. The harm that our aggregate actions cause indirectly is not as wrong as harm caused directly and our duty to avoid causing that harm is correspondingly less demanding. This argument does not underestimate the immense harm that climate change is causing nor is it too lenient, Fragnière thinks, on those who cause that harm. What it does do is help us to reconcile our competing moral intuitions about the importance of life projects to individual flourishing and the catastrophe of climate change. One assumption that might be questioned here is that moral reconciliation (whether partial or complete) is possible in our current situation. The moral calculus may tell us about the demandingness of our duties, but it does not seem to capture the moral tragedy of a situation in which fulfilling our duty still leaves us morally distraught. Tragedy of the commons models of climate change may be a self-fulfilling prophecy that we should try to avoid (Kopec, 2017), but the felt moral tragedy of our predicament is less likely to be circumventable. Another question-worthy assumption is that we can make sense of the idea of *individual* duties in a globalised world. Whilst the idea of life-projects helpfully introduces personal and existential considerations into deontological universalism, can it be said that anyone's life projects today are truly individual? (Greaves, 2014) Even if we can make sense of the idea of individual duties it is important that we focus on ways to share responsibility for our shared climate (Godoy, 2017).

In more localised collective action Smith and Monaghan examine historically charged ways of conceiving autonomy as *sovereignty*. 'Food sovereignty' has taken root as the self-interpretation of numerous grassroots environmental movements challenging global agri-business in the name of social and environmental justice. Without trying to delegitimise the goals or undermine the successes of these movements, Smith and Monaghan trace the conceptual history of sovereignty to show its problematic anti-political and anti-ecological implications. Drawing on the critical work of Giorgio Agamben and others, they show that sovereign power operates as a claim to rule in a state

of exception, thus attempting to place sovereignty beyond the reach of other power claims. Advocates of food sovereignty tend to be either unaware of or to wilfully ignore this conceptual history. What Smith and Monaghan make clear is that there are limits to the flexibility of meaning and that words like sovereignty carry significance into the new contexts in which they are used. There are often good strategic and rhetorical reasons to deploy 'buzz words' and to follow an immerging trend to build momentum for a movement—something that is especially evident in the age of retweets and hashtags. Yet we should not forget that the words we use and repeat ground our actions in space and time, joining us to historical events and ideas that we cannot simply disavow by redefining our terms. Our grounding words help create and sustain community, but they can also inadvertently ally us to thoughts and actions that we do not wish to endorse. Words ground us in space and time, but they can also lead us on to treacherous ground. When that happens we need to re-examine our basic vocabulary, consider using other words, or even creating new words to help our imaginations take flight.

Words that engage the imagination are the theme of Oakley, Ward and Christie's reading of the literary movement known as 'new nature writing'. They find in this disparate and extremely popular genre the potential to ignite and sustain collective politics and activism, despite its current limitations. Interestingly, many of the critical points made against contemporary nature writing have been made by nature writers themselves. Oakley, Ward and Christie analyse the recent debate between Mark Cocker and Robert MacFarlane in the *New Statesman* about the necessity, or otherwise, of making nature writing overtly political. That dispute not only brings to mind the post-war debate between Sartre and Adorno about whether literature in general should be 'committed', it also continues the tradition of nature writers going back to the Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Clare and Keats, who are all engaged in literary and political criticism of one form or another, understanding this to be part and parcel of their creative activity and engagement with nature. Far from bogging down the imagination in endless ratiocination, critical engagement with language is at the heart of nature writing's potential to overcome its own limitations and create new forms of collective politics. That is something that we can all learn from the new nature writing and from the articles in this volume: the words we use matter; they enable, but also potentially distort, our relations with nature and with each other. Whether we are writing literature or academic papers, devising policy or simply pointing out the surrounding world to a companion, well-chosen words ground our thoughts and let our imaginations take flight.

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