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Lost for Words? Gadamer and Benjamin on the Nature of Language and the 'Language' of Nature

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ABSTRACT

Language is commonly regarded as an exclusively human attribute and the possession of the word (*logos*) has long served to demarcate culture from nature. This is often taken to imply that nature is incapable of meaningful expression, that any meaning it acquires is merely bestowed upon it by humanity. This anthropic logocentrism seriously undermines those forms of 'environmental advocacy' which claim to find and speak of the meaning and value of nature *per se*. However, shorn of their own anthropocentric presuppositions, the expressivist hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Walter Benjamin might offer an alternative understanding of the nature of language and the language of nature.

KEYWORDS

Expressionism, Gadamer, hermeneutics, nature, language

Despite their erstwhile differences the canonical texts of the Western philosophical tradition are virtually unanimous in proclaiming the unique and privileged status of humanity based on our possession of the word (*logos*). Nature thus appears at a serious disadvantage in any *dialectic* with culture since it is deemed unable to speak to us directly; it is incapable of expressing itself with the determinate meaning we associate with linguistic communication. From this perspective the myriad meanings we do find in nature appear to be no more than products of the imaginative labours of the human mind and as such are both contestable and contested. The problem then, for many forms of environmental advocacy, is that any claims to speak on behalf of nature can be dismissed as being without foundation, or worse as simply foolish; those who think nature communicates something of itself to and through them simply delude themselves and others. The presumption that nature lacks language thus seems, quite

literally, to deny it a say in its own fate, a fate already in the hands of those least sensitive to the call of the wild(erness) and least likely to respond. The danger is that nature might be lost for (lack of) words.

Of course some might argue that the natural sciences tell us all there is to know about nature. But even if this were so there are limits upon what science can say. Although ecology might speak *of* nature its authoritative voice relies upon a claim to an objectivity that all too often serves to gag any attempt to speak *for* nature.¹ In any case, many environmentalists (e.g. Plumwood, 1993) regard this self-same scientific 'objectivity' as inextricably linked with our current inability to comprehend nature as anything more than an object, *qua* a material resource. If, as Heidegger (1993) argues, science forces nature (the earth) to manifest itself in a manner that accords with its own technological requirements, thereby denying it all other forms of expression, then science may prove a doubtful ally for those trying to conserve and explore other aspects of nature's being.

It is for these reasons that the interpretive philosophies (hermeneutics) of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Walter Benjamin, both of whom, I claim, understood language as an expression of being(s), might prove particularly fruitful for environmental advocacy. Their hermeneutics might allow us both to broaden the anthropic conception of language and address the possibility of interpreting non-human expressions in determinate ways. We must however recognise that Gadamer and Benjamin are no less caught in Western philosophical traditions; they too privilege culture over nature. It is therefore to the relation between culture, nature and language we must initially turn.

GADAMER, CULTURE AND THE WORD

The changing associations of the term 'culture' have been a central concern of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics. His essay, 'Culture and the Word' (Gadamer, 1998a) both reprises and extends the genealogy of 'culture' to be found in his magnum opus, *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1998b). In particular he attempts to reveal here the ethical significance of language for culture, as words and language are, he claims, 'the basic elemental givens, which [...] stand at the beginning of human history and the history of humanity' (Gadamer, 1998a: 3). Since language both requires and facilitates communication, a 'sharing in its purest form' (Gadamer, 1998a: 7), it might be regarded as the original ethical relation. Language 'first raises communality into words' (Gadamer, 1998a: 7).

Culture, language and ethics are then, Gadamer claims, coeval with humanity. But where, one might ask, does this leave the non-human, what happens to nature in this scheme of things? The short answer is that 'nature' simply becomes culture's antithesis, its antonym. Nature re-presents to culture everything that culture is not, it is something *less* and 'other' than human. As Gadamer remarks,

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the term *Kultur* first takes on this special meaning and value following the Enlightenment. To become cultured came to mean ‘that one could be lifted up above the rawness of the state of nature and progress along this path to become a perfect “policy maker,” toward complete humanity – this was the arrogant confidence of modernity at its beginnings’ (Gadamer, 1998a: 1).

This is not to say that ‘nature’ ceases to play a critical (in both senses) role in defining and *refining* culture. Once denoted as ‘other’, nature can serve as a reminder of the distance travelled by culture from its humble origins, or as a spur to further progress. Alternatively, those repelled by society’s moral turpitude can look to nature to find a refuge from, and a contrast to, social evils. Thus, Gadamer suggests, Kant’s founding of morality upon the autonomy of reason was originally inspired by Rousseau’s contrast between the purity and innocence of the natural realm and the corrupting influences of so-called ‘civilisation’. Although we are members of a society riddled with inequalities we all *share* the ability to reason by virtue of our inner (human) nature. Thus reason should ground the moral values of a genuinely *cultured* humanity.

But even though ‘nature’ thereby helps to effect the separation of a ‘higher’ cultural life (philosophy, art and ethics) from the pecuniary and self-serving instrumentality of the everyday – the superficiality of the merely social – it still finds itself excluded from culture’s sphere. Human nature is, Kant held, very different from non-human nature; only the human can be an ‘end in itself’. Nature, on the other hand, is never more than a means to these ends. Even where Rousseau’s Romanticism finds its greatest resonance in Kant’s writings, in his account of the sublime and the beautiful, the aesthetic and moral profundity of nature is a function of its ‘suited’ us *despite* its own presumed insensitivity to such matters (Kant, 1987). Thus although Kant freely admits that the effects of the work of art, an artifact produced by us expressly to convey aesthetic and moral ideals, are pre-figured in experiences of natural beauty, the fact that humans (and only humans) find nature beautiful and uplifting just shows how special *we* are. The *language* of nature exists solely for our moral edification, its radiant beauty *speaks to us* simply in order to confirm that ‘we are the ultimate end, the final goal of creation’ (Gadamer, 1998b: 51).

But, for Gadamer, even such a limited recognition of nature’s ‘voice’ seems problematic. To ascribe to nature the gift of a language that can speak to *us*, even if only in ‘words’ that it itself neither hears or comprehends, goes too far. It not only risks making art nature’s epigone but, more importantly, suggests that nature is capable of delivering moral monologues. ‘One can’, says Gadamer, ‘make a counter argument. The advantage of natural beauty over artistic beauty is only the other side of natural beauty’s inability to express something specific. Thus contrariwise, one can see that the advantage of art over natural beauty is that the language of art exerts its claims, and does not offer itself freely and indeterminately for interpretation according to one’s mood, but speaks to us in a significant and definite way’ (Gadamer, 1998b: 51). Contra Kant, nature has

no *determinate* voice, it is unable to compose *itself* in such a way as to speak meaningfully to us. The messages we receive are mere echoes of our own moods, our own concerns.

As Gadamer's history of the concept of 'culture' unfolds, 'nature' figures, again and again, as a dumb contrast to culture's (and Gadamer's) volubility. As the language and form of 'culture' changes so 'nature' follows behind, as culture's silent shadow, an *alter ego* denied any form of consciousness. Post-Enlightenment, as culture becomes the playground of the bourgeoisie, nature becomes the backdrop for its plays, the contents of its cabinets and museums, the subject of its edifying lectures. Then, with the critique of bourgeois values and the arrival of the Twentieth Century, nature becomes synonymous with a 'socialist' revolt against socialite extravagances, and with freedom and fresh air against the stifling heat and regularising clock-work of the factory. Even Gadamer admits that he was not immune to this particular version of 'nature's' 'rediscovered' charms. 'I myself belong to the generation that 'went into the woods' as members of the youth movement and utterly rejected the cultural life of the towns, especially the opera. These gestures of protest (even the costumes with the iridescent collars) were harmless' (Gadamer, 1998a: 2). In truth though, such thoughtless invocations of nature are seldom harmless. The youth movements, to which Gadamer presumably refers, collectively known as the *Wandervögel*, concocted a 'religion of nature' (Pois, 1986) that was easily absorbed by Nazi ideologues (Biehl & Staudenmaier, 1995). A significant number of these 'wandering free spirits' eventually sought roots in a blood and soil mentality, their iridescent collars mutated into the oak leaf epaulets of the SS.²

However, my point here is neither to use the benefit of hindsight to moralise about past misappropriations of nature nor simply to illustrate the ease with which it can be made to operate as a vehicle to maintain (naturalise) or critique any given social formation. To over-emphasise the malleability of nature as a signifier of changing cultural tendencies would in any case simply be to reiterate the subservience of nature to culture and to reinforce the anthropic presupposition that nature in itself is incapable of expressing anything meaningful.³ What is interesting in 'Culture and the World' is precisely the way in which, despite his sensitivity to historical variations in defining 'nature' and 'culture', Gadamer himself *consistently* designates nature as nothing more than culture's antonym. In this sense he not only *describes* the post-Enlightenment opposition between nature and culture he clearly *subscribes* to its anthropocentric tenets in an only slightly more 'refined' fashion.

The evidence of Gadamer's adherence to an anthropic principle is especially clear where the question of language is concerned. Gadamer makes it quite plain that he considers it to be the word (*logos*) that unifies humanity and distinguishes the human from the non-human. 'Because we [humanity] are a conversation, we are the one story of mankind [sic]' (Gadamer, 1998a: 3). This 'is a conversation

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that, however various its languages, always takes place in human, learnable ones. Man [sic] “has” the word, as Ferdinand Ebner expresses it, and that is precisely what distinguishes him from all other natural creatures’ (Gadamer, 1998a: 4). Here Gadamer turns to Aristotle. While other animals can express pleasure or pain, their cries are ‘extorted by nature’ (Gadamer, 1998a: 7). By contrast, the conventions of human discourse not only allow us the leeway to speak about the rights and wrongs of the situations that cause pleasure /pain, but each and every use of language is itself a confirmation of a ‘free agreement’, *kata synthecon*, between us.⁴ The word is what distinguishes humanity’s ‘form of life from that of certain kinds of herd animals’ (Gadamer, 1998a: 6).

Unlike the warning cries or mating calls of other animals our words are ‘genuine efforts towards communication’ (Gadamer, 1998a: 6), that is, they entail a ‘sharing with’ or *Mitteilung* (Gadamer, 1998a: 6). This sharing of language with each other does not diminish language – as sharing one’s property might be said to diminish it – but makes of it something more through the very act of sharing. This, says Gadamer, is how we should understand culture itself – it is the ‘domain of all that becomes more by sharing it’ (Gadamer, 1998a: 6). Thus Gadamer argues, ethics, language and culture arise together, and all alike entail a sharing, a co-responding and co-responsiveness to each other, i.e., a *dialogue*.⁵

Unfortunately, this means that ethics, language and culture also share the same limit. ‘Where does the sense [of language] end?’ asks Gadamer. ‘In the unity of the sentence? Surely, rather, in the unity of the whole discourse that ends in falling silent’ (Gadamer, 1998a: 4). And where, we might ask, is this silence to be found, where this limit on our senses and sensibilities? The answer seems clear – beyond that ‘sweeping horizon in which all human activity takes place, the horizon of nature’ (Gadamer, 1998a: 5). Nature marks the limit of Gadamer’s anthropocentric vision and discourse and the supposed limit of language.

BENJAMIN: ‘ON LANGUAGE AS SUCH’

In the initial pages of a short essay Walter Benjamin (1998) proposes a way of understanding language that shatters many of the anthropocentric presuppositions that seemingly underlie Gadamer’s thesis. Communication in words is, Benjamin claims,

only a particular case of human language [...] The existence of language, however, is not only coextensive with all the areas of human mental expression in which language is always in one sense or another inherent, but with absolutely everything. There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of all to communicate their mental meanings. This use of ‘language’ is in no way metaphorical. (Benjamin, 1998: 107)

This is an astounding claim for anyone brought up in a culture where language, mental life and humanity are regarded as synonymous. The idea that mice, trees and even rocks might have a language and/or a mental life would seem absurd to many. But Benjamin argues for a radical redefinition of the notion of language itself. He wants to subvert some of the anthropocentric presuppositions that make a particular (logo-centric) understanding of human language the sole model for *language as such*. Instead of linking language as such to the word it is defined as a ‘*capacity* for communication’ (Benjamin, 1998: 109), a capacity for *expression* that all things have. Since, Benjamin claims, it is impossible to think of anything existing which does not express itself in some way, anything that does not somehow communicate its presence to other things, then ‘we cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything’ (Benjamin, 1998: 107). This, claims Benjamin, is ‘not anthropomorphism’ (Benjamin, 1998: 110).

Benjamin defines that which expresses *itself* in language, that ‘itself’ which is the direct source of particular expressions, as a ‘mental entity’. We tend to think of mentality being inseparable from the use of language *qua* words, though of course we admit that we all *express our emotions* and, what is more, usually expect these expressions to be communicated to others and thus understood. Despite this, words remain the paradigmatic medium of human thought and communication, and hence we tend to deny mental being to those things that lack words. Benjamin counters such logo-centric prejudices, arguing that all forms of expression insofar as they communicate mental meaning are to be understood as forms of language.

There are a number of points that need clarification here. First, when Benjamin speaks of ‘mental entities’ he is not trying to establish a distinction between mental and physical entities, nor is he espousing a form of idealism that would claim that all things are purely ‘mental’. He is not arguing that every physical object has a more or less diffuse ‘mind’ – a dimensionless *res cogitans* – associated with it or that their physical existence is somehow ‘immaterial’. Rather he is arguing that all material things (all things) express themselves in various ways, and whatever of this expression is potentially communicable to other things *is* language as such. If one thus redefines mentality in terms of expression, then all ‘physical’ things are also inherently ‘mental’.⁶ It is often, precisely, a thing’s ‘materiality’ (in the sense of its tangibility) that is expressed and communicated to other things, the rock that falls on your head, the force of the river’s currents against your legs. Thus, when Benjamin claims that ‘that which in a mental entity is communicable *is* its language’ (Benjamin, 1998: 109) the ‘is’ (quite literally) *matters*. Language as such has ‘materiality’.⁷

This suggests that the term ‘mental entity’ (*geistige Wesen*) may prove more than a little misleading – since it is easy to slip back into conceiving of it as a ‘thinking thing’, rather than as a thing *per se*, a thing which, as part of its very being (its existence), must express itself. On the other hand, to emphasise materiality, as I have just done, has its own dangers, since this too is likely to be

read in terms of a dichotomy between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. Perhaps, though, the very strangeness to our ears of referring to the materiality of language might make this a somewhat less pernicious option. What is clear is that Benjamin was striving for some way to overcome the Cartesian dualism between an *immaterial language of thought* and the *thoughtless materiality of the world*. He wanted to re-conceptualise both in terms of an ‘immanent absolute’ (Caygill, 1998: 14).⁸ This is why Benjamin is at pains to emphasise that mental entities are expressed *in* not *through* language. A language does not re-present a given entity in a different immaterial linguistic medium (as we tend to think words do) rather this ‘medium’ – language, *is* nothing more than the communicable expression of the entity concerned.

This does not, in terms of an oft-maligned notion of postmodernism, mean that there is nothing outside of the text (of language). Benjamin warns us not to conflate ‘mental being’ and ‘linguistic being’. Mental being ‘is identical with linguistic being only insofar as it is capable of communication’ (Benjamin, 1998: 109). Not everything of an entity is communicable, but what is communicable *is* its linguistic being, its language. There is, if you like, nothing *communicable* that is outside of language and all that is communicable of an entity *is* its language.⁹ The ‘*linguistic being of all things is their language*’ (Benjamin, 1998: 109).

This brings us to a further point, that of the *immediacy* of language. If language is no more than the communicable expression of a mental entity then, as Benjamin points out, the answer to the question “‘What does language communicate?’” is therefore “‘All language communicates itself’” (Benjamin, 1998: 109). But if we understand Benjamin aright this is not a tautology but a profound insight into the nature of the relation between being and language. If language is the communicable expression of being and all language communicates is itself then ‘all language communicates itself *in* itself’ (Benjamin, 1998: 109). Thus Benjamin claims the problem of mediation, of how language manages to communicate ‘meaning’ is a false problem. It is not a question of how language carries meaning – as if meaning were something extraneous to language that must be attached to it, as if a language *could* somehow be meaningless. Rather, as Benjamin argues *nothing* is ever communicated *through* language and what is communicated *in* language simply is the linguistic being of things. In other words language is not a barrier to, or a conduit for, the transferal of meanings but an expression of an entity that becomes meaningful when it establishes communication with something else. And if this communication should seem strange and mysterious, if ‘one chooses to call this immediacy magic, then the primary problem of language is its magic’ (Benjamin, 1998: 109).

This immediacy, says Benjamin, ‘this notion of the magic of language points to something else: its infiniteness’ (Benjamin, 1998: 109). Because language is *not* a medium of exchange, because it is not a ‘currency’ between ‘sellers’ and

'buyers' who trade in disembodied 'meanings', then language is not confined to facilitating or regulating such an exchange. Language provides no assurance that the 'buyer' gets what they 'bargained' for, i.e. the 'seller's' supposedly original meaning. (In the case of language *caveat emptor* is not a warning to beware of shoddy goods, it is to call to pay attention to what is *being* expressed, i.e. to linguistic being.) *Meaning is not a commodity exchanged but a symptom of a communicative success, of an expression that has made an impression on others.* Language is not limited by its ability to accurately *represent* things to its 'clients', since it does no such thing; language is only limited by what can be expressed in a communicable manner. For this reason, Benjamin claims, 'all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity. Its linguistic being but not its verbal meaning defines its frontier' (Benjamin, 1998: 110).

GADAMER AND BENJAMIN IN CONVERSATION

Benjamin then, unlike Gadamer, does not make nature the horizon of language. Nature is not silent and, insofar as it too has 'linguistic being', it is potentially meaningful. However, when Benjamin turns from 'language as such' to the question of human language, to the 'language of Man' [sic] he reverts to an anthropic and logocentric perspective much closer to that of Gadamer.

As with all entities the 'language of Man' is the expression of 'his' particular linguistic being. However, human language is special, it consists of words and, says Benjamin, the purpose of words is to *name* things. '*It is therefore the linguistic being of man to name things*' (Benjamin, 1998: 110). Benjamin claims that naming is the pure form of language as such, it is that '*in which language itself communicates itself absolutely*' (Benjamin, 1998: 111). Because linguistic being is that which is communicable and since language (*qua* words) is *nothing* but communication then words perfectly expresses linguistic being without leaving any residue. And, because the ability to name, to use pure language, is a human preserve then the linguistic being of humanity is 'language as such'; it is the capacity to communicate. The mental being of humanity is language itself and our being is therefore fully expressible in language.¹⁰

This language can also express in full that which has been communicated to humanity by other entities. What nature manages to communicate of itself to humanity, humanity then expresses in the names it gives to nature. 'Man' says Benjamin 'is the namer, by this we recognise that through him pure language speaks. All nature, insofar as it communicates itself, communicates itself in language, and so finally in man. Hence he is the Lord of nature and can give name to things' (Benjamin, 1998: 111). What is more, in an ironic parallel to Kant's aesthetics, we find that humanity is the sole respondent of nature's own communicative abilities. 'To whom does the lamp communicate itself? The

mountain? The fox? But here the answer is: to man' (Benjamin, 1998: 110). And to whom does Man communicate himself? Benjamin's answer is unequivocal. '*In naming the mental being of man communicates itself to God*' (Benjamin, 1998: 111).

Despite arguing that nature too has a voice Benjamin's critique of language clearly falls back into privileging the human word above all other earthly 'languages'. This re-introduces an anthropic principle in another guise, as a linguistic variation on the theme of a Great Chain of Being (Lovejoy, 1964). Humanity is placed in a universal hierarchy above the other orders of nature yet below that of the heavens. This position grants him a special communicative relationship to God and a naming power over nature, the power of Adam. The flow of 'communication runs through the whole of nature from the *lowest* forms of existence to man and from man to God' (Benjamin, 1998: 123, my emphasis).

Like Gadamer then, but for rather different reasons, Benjamin clearly regards human language as unique. But more important by far than this lingering anthropocentrism is the fact that both Benjamin and Gadamer regard language as a direct *expression* of being. In Gadamer's case this takes the form of a critique of psychologism, a critique that has its origins in the Heideggerian reception of Husserl.¹¹ Gadamer argues that we must cease to understand language as giving voice to subjective (pre-linguistic) *ideas*. In *Truth and Method* (1998b), he is at pains to explain that 'expression' should not be understood in its post-Enlightenment (subjectivist) sense, as an expression of something interior, i.e. a psychological state of mind or experience (*Erlebnis*). An 'expression is never merely a sign that points back to something else, something within; rather what is expressed is itself present in the expression' (Gadamer, 1998b: 504). That is, Gadamer regards language as an expression of Being as such and not of some pre-linguistic mental state i.e. not of ideas.¹² Like Benjamin, Gadamer argues that 'language is the direct expression of that which communicates *itself* in it' (Benjamin 1998a).

In other words, while Gadamer and Benjamin might disagree on the '*language*' of nature they are much closer about the *nature of language*. Indeed in places Gadamer seems to explicitly espouse a universal ontology of language startlingly close to that of Benjamin. His critique of the subjectivisation of meaning leads him to regard language as something that is produced by the active participation of the communicant. It is 'this activity of the thing itself [...what Benjamin might term the linguistic being of a mental entity] that takes hold of the speaker' (Gadamer, 1998b: 474). This activity, Gadamer claims, tells us something about the ontology of 'everything toward which understanding can be directed. *Being that can be understood is language*' (Gadamer, 1998b: 474). As Jean Grondin (1994: 118) remarks, this statement is not, as it is sometimes taken to be, indicative of a variety of linguistic reductivism. Like Benjamin, Gadamer is not arguing that there is nothing outside of language, but that only that which is expressed by being in a manner that can be communicated *is* language. What

is *inexpressible* is not language, it is the ineffable being of things-in-themselves.¹³ 'What is stated is not everything. The unsaid is what first makes what is stated into a word that can reach us' (Gadamer in Grondin, 1994: 119).

Here then Gadamer seems to be speaking of what Benjamin would call 'language as such' and not just human language. This suspicion seems to be confirmed because just following the remark that 'being that can be understood is language' he uncharacteristically admits that we can 'speak not only of a language of art but also of a language of nature – in short, of any language that things have' (Gadamer, 1998b: 475).

Since, as we have seen Gadamer in no way regards human language as the expression of a *res cogitans*, of a uniquely human mental realm, then there is no *a priori* reason why language, the ability to communicate, should be limited to humans. But if, as Gadamer argues, whatever being presents of itself for understanding is language, this is still far from granting nature a voice of its own. For, like Kant and Benjamin, Gadamer too retains an anthropocentric prejudice which regards nature as presenting itself *only* to humanity and to human understanding. And, since human understanding is something that takes place in human language, for Gadamer and Benjamin the limit on language as such, on what can be meaningfully expressed of nature, is, in the last instance, human language itself. Nature's linguistic being is not that which nature is capable of expressing but is confined to that which actually makes an impression on humanity in a form that we can put into words.

It is vital that we understand exactly what this limit does and does not imply for our speaking of nature. Benjamin and Gadamer are not entirely in agreement here. Benjamin seems to emphasise a direct communicative link between nature and humanity whereby human language faithfully expresses what nature has impressed upon us. But his short essay gives little indication of *how* exactly this might happen. Do we just find the words deep within us, does nature call them forth, is it some God given ability? Words, for Benjamin, are quite literally, a form of *revelation*. Gadamer on the other hand provides a much more sophisticated account of language that makes 'linguistic traditions' the ultimate source of the words we use. But, insofar as such traditions are limited to a dialogue between humans, nature itself is kept at one remove from the expressiveness of human language. How exactly then is human language supposed to let nature speak?

IN OTHER(S) 'WORDS': ON THE LANGUAGE OF NATURE AND ITS EXPRESSION IN THE WORD

For Gadamer a linguistic tradition gives *expression* to and helps constitute a mode of existence within the world. Like the later Wittgenstein he occasionally refers to this mode of being as a 'form of life'.¹⁴ A word becomes meaningful

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when we recognise the context of its employment within this form of life.¹⁵ For Gadamer this context is entirely cultural, he largely ignores the contribution made by nature in producing the backgrounds against and within which language games and meanings emerge. But this particular prejudice, so ingrained that it goes virtually unnoticed in humanist circles, is difficult to justify since human traditions never exist in an environmental vacuum.¹⁶ This position could only be defended by recourse to a bizarre form of cultural idealism that envisaged culture as a self-creating world entirely independent of and in no way reliant upon nature. Although I in no way wish to imply that our experiences and encounters with nature are not culturally mediated it is also the case that culture itself is dependent upon and mediated by nature, including our embodied existence. Many 'natural' phenomena thus find expression within human language because they too constitute part of particular human forms of life; the summer monsoon bringing rain to Asia, the maize that formed the staple diet of Mayan Meso-America, the stars that enabled the Pacific islanders to navigate, etc.

The recognition of the importance of the cultural mediation of nature slides into anthropocentrism if we elide the difference between arguing that nature expresses itself meaningfully in playing a role in human social practices, farming, eating, travelling, etc., and saying that nature's meaning is limited to and determined by those practices. This effectively makes human social practices the sole producers of meaning.¹⁷ But, the monsoon does not become meaningful simply because certain social practices ascribe meaning to it. It is meaningful because it too is party to a particular 'form of life'. It is because the effects it produces make an impression on that mode of being in the world that they are carried over into its linguistic tradition. This impression is the *monsoon's* message.

This may seem a subtle point but it is vitally important. Anthropocentrists constantly disparage those who claim to find meaning in nature arguing that meaning is purely a product of human activity. Any meanings found in nature are, they claim, human constructions, the social equivalents, as it were, of Lockean secondary qualities with which we 'clothe appropriate bodies in external nature' (Whitehead, 1926: 80).¹⁸ But if we take Gadamer's and Benjamin's expressionism seriously then this position seems untenable. From their perspective meanings are not an invention of the human mind, whether individual or social, rather something becomes meaningful when it communicates something of itself to us. There seems no *a priori* reason why the impressions made by nature's myriad activities and intrusions should be any less effective and important than the impressions made by other humans. Like the birth of a child, or the impending visit of a relative, in much of South-East Asia the monsoon is a part of the fabric of being-in-the-world. It is just as meaningful an event, and its meaning too comes from the manner in which it communicates something of itself within that form of life.

To be sure, the patterns of human social existence influence the manner in which nature can and does communicate itself to us, but this is a different matter entirely. This influence does not imply that nature cannot express itself, that it is inherently meaningless, but that we only tend to recognise as meaningful those expressions that *matter to us* and can therefore (usually) be spoken of in human language. This is much less of a restriction than is sometimes imagined, indeed to Benjamin it is no restriction at all since human language can express *everything* that has been communicated to us without residue. For Gadamer understanding is restricted to that which can be spoken of within the linguistic tradition that expresses our particular form of life. The historical unfolding of that form of life thus places certain limits on the ability we have to speak of and understand nature (*and* culture). But these 'limits' are not absolute because linguistic traditions are not closed; they are open to cultural and natural interventions – a meeting with a new culture, an invention – the encounter with a new species, a plague etc.

Obviously, the way nature makes an impression on us will *in part* depend upon the kind of culture we have. All cultures facilitate and limit the manner of our listening to the language of nature in their own ways. But insofar as any natural entity is understood as being party to a form of life it is never meaningless. Those in modern Western society who claim to find nature meaningless are disingenuous. In fact they restrict the meanings nature has to those that matter to them, those supposedly 'discovered' by science and technology. Nature only speaks to them insofar as it can express itself in a manner communicable in terms of quantity, number, and instrumentality. The modern form of life and its associated linguistic traditions regard nature as inert material at the service of humanity, as what Heidegger referred to as a 'standing reserve' (Heidegger, 1993). Nature's meaning is restricted to its use, its utility for us.

But such instrumentalism is not characteristic of all forms of life even within modernity. Many people still listen to the sound of water over stone, to the wind's wild cries and the call of eagles and otters with very different ears. That the anthropocentrist finds no meaning in the skylark's song where for me it overflows with meaning is not a matter of my being mad or mistaken. Nor do I simply hear what *I* want to hear – I am not replacing anthropocentrism with anthropomorphism. Rather it is indicative of differences between their form of life and mine and this is to recognise that all interpretation of the expressions of others, whether human or non-human, begins within its own horizons, horizons determined by particular forms of life.

Now, as Gadamer points out, communication entails a willingness to go beyond those horizons, to be open to the other in the language they speak, to recognise the differences between their form of life and our own. This understanding has been achieved when we get a *feeling* for how the other lives, for their

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mode of being. Understanding thus requires a *practical sense* for how the other differs from ourselves, a sensitivity to the other's situation, a kind of epistemological 'tact' that 'avoids the *offensive*, the *intrusive*, the *violation of the intimate sphere* of the [other] person' (Gadamer, 1998: 16, my emphasis). In this sense understanding takes the form of an ethical relation since it requires us to recognise the other's ineliminable difference to ourselves.¹⁹ As we broaden our horizons we see that 'there is an Other, who is not an object *for* the subject but someone to whom we are bound in the reciprocations of language and life' (Gadamer in Grondin, 1994: x, my emphasis). '[A]nd so it is that love gives insight' (Gadamer, 1998b: 233).

Anthropocentrists find no meaning in the skylark's song because the skylark is no more than an object for them. They have no intention of *respecting* the skylark's otherness, and make no attempt to attain a feeling for its different form of life. Wittgenstein famously wrote, that '[i]f a lion could talk, we could not understand him' (Wittgenstein, 1988a: 223). But the real problem is that because the lion, like the skylark can't talk *in words* we usually don't *try* to understand them, we simply regard them as having nothing meaningful to say (Manes, 1992).²⁰ Yet those humans whose form of life does not lead them to distance themselves from nature do come to understandings with it and express those understandings in their particular languages. Such 'meetings' of mental entities do not require agreement nor even compromise but a coming to a *modus vivendi*, a way of living with and a way of understanding the other in all their difference. The 'fusion' of horizons does not entail an assimilation of positions but marks a conscious attempt to bring out differences and learn from them (Gadamer, 1998b: 306). This is why this process is always also one of *self-cultivation* or *self-formation*.

Gadamer's residual anthropocentrism means that he too has difficulty in recognising the language of nature. Like Benjamin, he argues that horizons can be fused without residue only in human language, complete understanding is possible only within the word (*logos*). But human expression is not confined to or completely expressed in words. We communicate in many different ways, a sidelong glance, a tone of voice, an enigmatic smile. Only the glib and inattentive fail to find themselves lost for words on some occasions. And once we recognise that the 'language of Man', fine as it may be, is by no means capable of expressing all that makes an impression on us then we might be less likely to regard it as paradigmatic of language as such.²¹

Nature's expressions may often seem indeterminate to those who have no determinate way of living with it, to the modernists whose form of life merely objectifies it. But there are many aspects of culture too that are far from being determinate – think of the languages of painting and music. And there are many aspects of nature that even the most anthropocentric person would have to

struggle to find indeterminate – the black cloud that threatens an impending storm, the chill wind that speaks of the icy North, the fear and pain on a wounded animal's face, the joy in a dog's wagging tail.

Gadamer uncritically accepts that becoming cultured entails distancing oneself from nature and that this distancing is facilitated by our particular ability to share in human language, in the communality of the word. But the danger in making conversation a purely human affair is that we become deaf to nature's entreaties, that becoming cultured means paying more attention to the language of *haute cuisine* than the cries from the slaughterhouse. There is no need for this to be so, indeed to even believe that it is so is a sign of the hegemony of humanism and anthropocentrism in modern Western linguistic traditions. Somewhere along the line other aspects of nature must enter human discourse. It is only our modern form of life that stops us recognising that nature too can impart something of itself just as immediately and just as magically as the human word. Only when we recognise that, in Christopher Manes (1992: 344) words, 'human speech is [...] a subset of the speaking of the world' will we be able to envisage a genuine *dialectical materialism* and develop an ethical respect for nature's inordinate difference.

NOTES

¹ When I started my degree in ecology in 1979 our lecturers constantly argued that the emergent political ecology that had inspired our interest in this, then novel, university topic had nothing whatsoever to do with the proper scientific study of ecosystems.

² Which is not to suggest that this was in any way a path taken by Gadamer although he did make some worrying remarks on occasions. See for example his Paris lectures on Herder delivered in 1941. Herder 'recognizes the supportive and nurturing power of the mother tongue; he traces in this the imprinting force of history that fuses with the natural conditions of blood, climate, landscape and so on' (Gadamer in Warnke, 1987: 71). Warnke believes that these passages were 'quite moderate' for the time; however, they were removed from post-war editions.

³ This position is currently associated with strong varieties of social constructivism. For example Keith Tester (1991: 46) states that 'animals are indeed a blank paper which can be inscribed with any message, and symbolic meaning, that the society wishes'. But on this issue and for a summary of the arguments see Smith, 1999.

⁴ Critics of Gadamer's hermeneutics have often focused on the extent to which linguistic *conventions* can be equated with *free agreement*. Since Gadamer clearly acknowledges that we have no 'choice' but to utilise a pre-given language and since this language may be tied to traditions, communities or situations that are far from 'ethical' such claims have been seen to imply either an inherent conservatism or a 'radical idealisation' of real conversations (Walzer, 1990: 191). Thus, for example, Albrecht Wellmer argues 'that the dialogue which, according to Gadamer, we 'are' is also a context of power and precisely for this reason no dialogue' (Wellmer in Warnke, 1987: 112).

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⁵For Gadamer, behaving ethically, like using language, is a *habit* we must acquire but such ‘habits’ are quite unlike the habitual behaviour of animals. First, the animal cannot give an account of, or answer for itself. *Ethos* and language go together – they belong to the domain of ‘common validity’ (Gadamer, 1998a: 8). Second, an *ethos* is something that must be ‘cultivated’, which must become en-cultured through education. ‘[O]nly *paideia*, only education, can overcome man’s deep-rooted instinct of aggression’ (Gadamer, 1998a: 9). Culture then is again defined in opposition to nature, it is that which ‘stops men from assaulting one another, and from being worse than any animal’ (Gadamer, 1998a: 10).

⁶Or perhaps more accurately the distinction between mental and physical is itself problematised.

⁷‘[H]ere we should recall the material community of things in their communication’ (Benjamin, 1998: 122).

⁸At the time of writing ‘On Language’ (1916) Benjamin had yet to configure his thought in terms of the Marxist materialism he would later adopt and adapt to his own purposes. Instead he conceptualises the unity of material and linguistic expressions in terms of an immanent ‘spirituality’, (the term *geistige Wesen* is perhaps better translated as ‘spiritual essence’). But this *language of spiritual essences* is, in Benjamin, only a change of emphasis away from becoming a *dialectical* materialism.

⁹So long as we remember that language here is not conceived of in anthropic terms.

¹⁰No doubt a logician would find this a dubious argument but, for the moment, I merely want to set out the form of Benjamin’s thesis.

¹¹Indeed, for Gadamer ‘the critique of the psychologization of the concept of expression runs through the whole of our present investigation [*Truth and Method*] and is at the basis of our critique’ (Gadamer, 1998b: 504–5).

¹²Gadamer’s and Benjamin’s critique of subjectivism is in some ways akin to the later Wittgenstein’s (1988a) philosophy of language. He too was concerned to highlight the radical indeterminacy and immediacy of language and to subvert a representational theory of language that regards ‘thought’ and ‘meaning’ as something behind yet mediated by language. See Gadamer’s own comments on Wittgenstein and these ‘convergences in the object of criticism’ (Gadamer, 1977: 176).

¹³That is, things-in-themselves insofar as they are *in* themselves and because they are not expressed cannot make an impression on us. In this sense Gadamer clearly adheres to the phenomenological tradition.

¹⁴On other occasions, following Husserl, he sometimes refers to this as a life-world (*Lebenswelt*).

¹⁵Here too there is a parallel with Wittgenstein for whom the meaning of a word simply is its use within a particular form of life. ‘A meaning of a word is a kind of employment of it’ (Wittgenstein, 1988b: #61). Gadamer remarks that ‘Wittgenstein’s concept of “language games” seemed quite natural to me when I came across it’ (Gadamer, 1998b: xxxvi).

¹⁶Wittgenstein would certainly have no problem in recognising the contribution of nature to a form of life. As Phillips (1977: 83) states ‘Wittgenstein, then, does not want to endorse a position which holds that facts of nature *completely* determine language, nor, on the other hand, does he want to say the facts of nature are *totally* creations of language.’ For supportive readings see Baker (1984) and Davidson and Smith (1999).

¹⁷This is the linguistic equivalent of Marx making human labour the sole medium through which the objectification of nature occurs. The inevitable result of such a move is to deny nature's own productivity, which is of course precisely that forgetfulness of Being that Heidegger finds characteristic of all humanism. (Smith 2001)

¹⁸Whitehead (1926: 80) describes secondary qualities thus. '[T]he bodies are perceived with qualities which in reality do not belong to them, qualities which in fact are purely offspring of the mind. Thus nature gets credit which should in truth be reserved for ourselves: the rose for its scent: the nightingale for his song: and the sun for his radiance. The poets are entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves, and should turn them into odes of self-congratulation on the excellency of the human mind. Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly.'

¹⁹Ethical in the sense of entailing a loving respect for the other's difference. See Levinas, 1991; Peperzak, 1993; and in relation to environmental otherness see Smith 2001.

²⁰Wittgenstein is of course using the lion as a hypothetical example of a form of life so different from our own that there might be no point of contact, no way of grasping the context of his speech and hence what he means. But think of Androcles and the Lion, Joy Adamson and Elsa etc.

²¹Some might regard my broadening the term communication as rendering it meaningless, but this is far from the case. It plays a key and very specific role in explicating a phenomenological and hermeneutic account of the life-world. The fact that a term might have a wide general application does not render it meaningless – think of terms like 'matter', 'being', 'relational' etc.

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