



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Vogel, Steven. "The Silence of Nature."
Environmental Values 15, no. 2, (2006): 145-171.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5959>

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 2006. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publisher. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk/>

The Silence of Nature

STEVEN VOGEL

*Department of Philosophy
Denison University
Granville, OH 43023 USA*

ABSTRACT

In claiming that ‘nature speaks’, authors such as Scott Friskics and David Abram implicitly agree that language use is linked to moral considerability, adding only that we need to extend our conception of language to see that non-humans too use it. I argue that the ethical significance of language use derives from its role in *dialogue*, in which speakers make truth-claims, question and potentially criticise the claims of others, and provide justifications for the claims they raise themselves. Non-human entities (as a contingent matter) seem not to engage in dialogue in this sense, and none of the examples Friskics and Abram offer suggest that they do. Thus the conception of language such authors employ is too weak to support the ethical conclusions they implicitly wish to defend.

KEY WORDS

Language, nature, ethics, moral considerability, Abram, Habermas

Nature – so a certain familiar argument goes – talks; the trouble is that we don’t listen. We moderns have convinced ourselves that only humans speak, and as a result we can no longer hear the other voices that surround us. Nature appears to us as mute, with no inner life and nothing to communicate, and so we think we can do with it whatever we wish. Because we do not hear what nature has to say, nor even that it is saying anything at all, we treat natural entities as mere things rather than as other subjects with whom we share a common world. We believe that we have moral duties only to those whose voices we *do* hear – which is to say, our fellow humans. Those who are able to speak deserve our respect as moral agents; since nature does not seem to speak, we feel justified in denying it such respect. But if we listened carefully, and expanded our conception of what speech and language involve, we would come to see, or rather to hear, that nature and natural entities in fact do speak, and so do deserve moral respect. Only on

the basis of such a sympathetic listening to nature, the argument concludes, is an adequate non-anthropocentric environmental ethic possible.

Such an argument draws a close connection between speech and moral considerability, and so between language and ethics, in a way that reverses some traditional non-anthropocentric arguments. For historically it has been anthropocentrism that has emphasised language as the basis of moral consideration, arguing that humans possess a unique moral status precisely because of their unique ability to use language. Non-anthropocentrists have typically responded to this argument by conceding on the one hand that only humans use language but denying on the other that this fact has any special moral relevance: as Bentham famously put it, the question isn't 'can they talk?' but 'can they suffer?' The argument just outlined, though, turns this around: rather than denying the moral relevance of the ability to speak, it denies instead that humans are the only creatures who possess that ability. In doing so it acknowledges a close relation between language and ethics, while adding however that we need to expand our conception of language in order to recognise that nature speaks.

I believe myself that there is a close connection between language and ethics, but I do not believe that nature speaks – or rather (since a lot depends on what is meant here by language and by speech), I do not believe that it speaks in a way that has the ethical implications the argument just outlined suggests. In what follows I want to examine two recent versions of that argument. My intention will mostly be negative: in both cases, my claim will be that the notion of language employed lacks some of the key elements needed to bear the ethical weight the argument requires. In defending this claim, though, I hope as well to make some positive contributions towards understanding the complex connections among language, ethics, and nature.

I

Why might being able to speak be morally relevant? Why, that is, might the discovery that an entity uses language itself be a justification for treating it as morally considerable? One possible answer – though not a satisfactory one, I think – might be: because such an entity would be able to use its speech to tell us about *other* morally significant characteristics it possesses. It might be able to express its pain to us, and thus convince us that it can suffer; it might be able to describe its goals, and so reveal its teleological character; it might be able to explain its actions in a way that clearly indicates its rationality. But such cases would not show the *intrinsic* moral significance of language use, because language would function in them simply as a way of informing us of *something else* that we take as morally important. Similarly if it turned out that language users were morally considerable because being able to speak entails being a subject, it would still turn out to be subjectivity rather than speech that was being taken

THE SILENCE OF NATURE

as the morally relevant capacity. If being able to speak is to be *itself* morally significant, there must be something morally significant about speaking *itself*, not just about what the speaker tells us in its speech.

In fact the idea that the connection between language and moral considerability lies in the evidence speech provides about private characteristics of the speaker (such as subjectivity or rationality or sentience) ignores a central fact about language, which is that for there to be speakers there must also be hearers, and that these hearers are capable of being speakers too. We too – the ones to whom the speech of others can be said to provide evidence – must be language users, else that speech would not be evidence at all. In this sense it is not subjectivity that is uniquely revealed by the ability to use language so much as it is intersubjectivity. To speak is not merely to express oneself out loud, it is to converse. Language is first and foremost talking, which is to say talking with others; and to discover that an entity uses language means discovering that it is *someone with whom I can talk*. When an entity speaks – not simply *to* me, but *with* me – I find myself connected to it, in a relationship that is built and confirmed in the conversation itself. In our talking I learn not just about my interlocutor, but about myself, as well as about the world we inhabit together. It is through talking with others, indeed, that I come to be who I am, that I come to understand the world we share, that I come to see those others as like me or unlike me (but still as tied to me in that we are talking together), that I come to think about what's right and wrong.

The key thing I learn in conversation is a lesson of symmetry, and therefore of reciprocity: I learn that just as you appear to me as an other, as an interlocutor, so too do I appear as other to you – that indeed to *you* you are 'I', and I am 'you'. This startling recognition teaches me that there is no built-in privilege to my perspective over yours (since to you, your perspective is also called 'mine'). And this means in turn that whatever happens to me must also be understandable as potentially happening to you, and so whatever reasons I might have to justify my actions must also be reasons that you could offer to justify similar actions. To speak with an other is thus to recognise that other as an equal, in a way that already points towards an ethical principle of universalisation. Those with whom I can speak are those to whom I owe the obligation of respect; to fail to respect them would be to violate the very terms that make our speaking together possible. Thus it is in dialogue with others, and in the intersubjectivity that such dialogue both grounds and confirms, that the connection between language use and ethics is found.¹

A few years ago Scott Friskics published an essay whose title, 'Dialogical Relations with Nature', suggests an understanding of this point. In it, Friskics makes a series of very strong claims about nature's speech. 'As I reflect on my own experience', he writes, 'it seems the most obvious thing in the world that things speak.'² He begins with a personal account of a mountain near his home, describing his daily walk to sit by it. He goes, he says, because the mountain

'speaks to me, calls me up out of my cabin and beckons me to sit in its silent, hulking presence'.³ Friskics suggests that all things in the world can be seen as calling to us in this way. 'That things speak', he writes, 'that they present themselves and disclose their presence as speech, is an insight shared among poets, philosophers, and religious thinkers alike.'⁴ The trouble today, however, is that 'we aren't very good at listening', and so we miss the voices of natural objects.⁵ To be able once again to hear the voices and respond to the call of the natural creatures with whom we share the earth, Friskics says, requires what he calls 'faith', by which he means a kind of openness to them, a responsiveness to the being of the beings we encounter. Here is the basis of our ethical responsibility to the natural creatures that surround us: it is 'response-ability', based fundamentally on 'responding, being responsive to the address of the other'.⁶

This is an evocative and eloquent account. But there's something odd about its conception both of nature's speech and of the appropriate response to that speech. For despite Friskics's repeated appeal in his essay to the notion of dialogue, in fact there is no real place for dialogue in it at all. His conception of the ethical obligation generated by the recognition that nature speaks seems merely to be that we should *listen*, never that we too should speak.⁷ Thus his relation to the mountain is one where it calls him and he comes; there's no actual *dialogue* between them. 'A dialogue, by definition', Friskics writes, 'requires the active participation of both speaker and listener',⁸ and this is surely true – but he leaves out of the definition the equally important clause that the roles of speaker and listener must be *reciprocally taken up by both parties in turn*. Although Friskics criticises the contemporary world as being stuck in monologue in fact his own view seems monologic: it's nature who does all the talking. The moment of symmetry crucial to real use of language is simply missing: we are called to respond to the speech of entities in nature, but they are never called to respond to us. Friskics describes 'dialogue' as a relation where 'we give our full attention to the address of the beings and things we meet, engage them as self-speaking presences, and respond to their claims wholeheartedly and without reserve',⁹ but do the self-speaking entities we attend and respond to in nature ever themselves give us their full attention in this way, engage us, respond to our claims?

Of course they don't; they can't, as we all know, and it would be a silly category mistake to ask them to do so. But then it follows that the relation between us and non-human natural entities is not and cannot be a dialogical one – which means in turn that the 'speech' that nature is supposedly engaging in is not real speech at all. Nature does not on Friskics's account actually *use* language, because to use language is to converse and nowhere in his account does conversation take place. As Friskics describes it, nature does not talk with us, it talks at us: we respond to it like silent subjects listening to the commands of a monarch, not like participants in a dialogue who develop mutual understanding and respect through repeatedly and alternately taking up the positions of

THE SILENCE OF NATURE

speaker and listener. The monarch's commands cannot be questioned, and for Friskics neither (apparently) can the call of the mountain, or of anything else in nature. But conversation also means dispute and disagreement, because of the ever-present possibility that the way things seem to me will not be the way they seem to you. Language use makes possible the articulation of competing claims, while at the same time positing the possibility of a procedure for resolving them. Once you and I learn that we disagree, we also see that we each need both to explain to the other why things seem to us as they do and to respond to the other's criticisms of those explanations; in doing so we both implicitly express the hope that the other might be brought to see things differently while also admitting the reciprocal possibility that we ourselves might be brought to see things differently as well. Here is another way that ethics and language are connected: for it is in language – by which I mean language-*use*, conversation – that claims, including ethical claims, find justification.

Yet on Friskics's account there is no room for competing claims, nor for justification. The claims of nature are absolute, like those of a monarch. Modern humans are selfish, they don't listen to nature, and if their views conflict with those of the mountain it is perfectly clear who Friskics thinks is right: the mountain. Yet these latter claims themselves are ethical ones. How are *they* to be justified, and who can justify them? Who makes these claims? Is it the mountain who makes them – and if so, in what sort of ethical conversation, marked by what sort of obligation to offer reasons? Or is it not in fact someone else making them: Friskics himself? And then the question becomes: in the evocations of nature's speech, who is it who is really speaking?

II

David Abram, in his suggestive and beautifully written book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, also wants to argue that nature speaks and that we need to (re)learn to listen to it. Abram's view of language seems closer to real dialogue than does Friskics's, because for Abram it follows from an account of perception as requiring the mutual interpenetration of subject and object, and thus as involving a kind of symmetry from the very start. Drawing heavily and well from Merleau-Ponty, Abram offers a phenomenological account of perception as fundamentally embodied, according to which my ability to touch or see objects in the world depends on my *own* tangibility and visibility. And the embodied character of perception is for Abram connected as well to the embodied character of language. 'Human language', he writes, is 'a profoundly carnal phenomenon.'¹⁰ Living speech is voiced, and is at bottom a kind of vocal gesture. To recognise the bodily and gestural character of language, however, is also to see its continuity with similar modes of expressiveness in the 'more-than-human' world: 'if language is always, in its depths, physically and sensorially resonant', Abram writes,

'then it can never be definitively separated from the evident expressiveness of birdsong, or the evocative howl of a wolf late at night... Language as a bodily phenomenon accrues to *all* expressive bodies, not just to the human.'¹¹ And Abram finds expressive bodies everywhere: not just birds or wolves, but trees and brooks and winds as well.¹²

Human language is thus tied at a deep level to a more general expressiveness to things, an expressiveness that in turn derives from the mutually participatory character of perception. 'Our most immediate experience of things', writes Abram (referring to Merleau-Ponty) 'is necessarily an experience of reciprocal encounter.... From within the depths of this encounter, we know the thing or phenomenon only as our interlocutor – as a dynamic presence that confronts us and draws us into relation.'¹³ Elsewhere he writes that for Merleau-Ponty perception 'is a sort of silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal awareness – and often, even, *independent* of my verbal awareness, as when ... my legs, hiking, continually attune and adjust themselves to the varying steepness of the mountain slopes behind this house without my verbal consciousness needing to direct those adjustments.'¹⁴

But to say that perception is matter of mutual participation, that in perception we experience things as responding to us and hence as expressive, is not to say that those things *talk*. Although surely conversations are experiences of reciprocal encounter, not all experiences of reciprocal encounter are conversations, and not all objects that I encounter are correctly called my interlocutors. Abram wants to draw our attention to the somatic, gestural, expressive elements that underlie our use of language, and does so well, but he fails sufficiently to acknowledge that there is more to language than this, instead repeatedly committing the fallacy of slipping from the claim that X is based on Y or couldn't exist without Y to the claim that therefore X really is nothing but Y or that all cases of Y can actually be viewed as cases of X.¹⁵ Abram at one point asks us to imagine overhearing a conversation between two old friends who meet by chance after a long separation, and to notice the 'tonal, melodic layer of communication beneath the explicit denotative meaning of the words – a rippling rise and fall of the voices in a sort of musical duet, rather like two birds singing to each other'.¹⁶ He is surely right to point out this sort of thing, which does help us recognise language's foundation in sound and in a kind of preverbal animal expressiveness; and yet what he fails to note – as he goes on to claim, less persuasively, that 'this melodic singing is carrying the bulk of communication in this encounter' – is that the 'explicit denotative meaning of the words' adds an element that is *sui generis* and not to be ignored. For language use is not only expressive, it also *has content*, and that content itself is part of what is being expressed, as we realise if we imagine how the 'melodic layer of communication' here would change depending on what the parties actually say – as one tells the other, perhaps, of a love affair ended, or a new one begun, or as the second breaks the news to the first of a mutual friend who has died. Abram

THE SILENCE OF NATURE

thinks that ‘the explicit meanings of the actual words ride on the surface of this [melodic] depth like waves on the surface of the sea’, but the metaphor is at best misleading. Precisely because the words have *content*, they inevitably affect the melody of the conversation too, and so it makes no sense to treat the latter as somehow deeper or the former as merely superficial.¹⁷

In language use, something is *said*: a claim is made about how the world is, a claim in which something is asserted to be *true*, and this is what distinguishes language use from other kinds of ‘responsiveness’ or ‘expression’.¹⁸ When my legs adjust themselves to changes in the terrain, no assertion is made – although of course *from* the fact that such an adjustment has occurred one might be moved to make an assertion: ‘it sure is hilly here!’ Similarly birdsongs (as far as I know) make no assertions, though they may indeed serve as expressions of hunger, or happiness, or the search for a mate. When old (human) friends meet, though, they do not merely express delight through the tones of their voice (though doubtless they do so too): they *tell* each other things, which is to say they communicate content about the world (and might delight, too, in what is thereby communicated). If Friskics fails to grasp the reciprocal and dialogic character of language use, and hence misses its connection to intersubjectivity, Abram fails to grasp the character of language use as contentful, and hence misses its connection to objectivity.

For language has these two aspects: in conversation we speak *with* each other, *about* the world. And they are connected: we learn about the world *through* speaking with each other. Abram takes over from phenomenology a tendency to over-privilege direct experience, failing to see language’s role in providing intersubjective correction to such experience. At one point he uses the example of a sleight-of-hand-magician doing a coin trick to illustrate the way perceivers ‘participate’ in constituting the world they experience. Although the trick involves two coins (one in each of the magician’s hands) being alternately hidden and then revealed, the audience sees only a single coin apparently jumping from one hand to the other. ‘The perceiving body’, writes Abram, ‘gregariously participates in the activity of the world, lending its imagination to things in order to see them more fully. The invisible journey of the coin is contributed, quite spontaneously, by the promiscuous creativity of the senses.’¹⁹

The example is startling, though, because it is an example of *error*. The magician takes advantage of the audience’s tendency to project its own expectations onto its experience in order to deceive it into seeing something that is not there (and not, surely, into seeing anything ‘more fully’). The example actually displays something Abram has great difficulty conceding: that our immediate direct experience of the world might be *mistaken* (including, for that matter, our experience of it as ‘sentient’ and ‘expressive’). Abram speaks critically of a modern Western ‘style of awareness that disparages sensorial reality’, repeatedly suggesting that any appeal to ‘objective’ truth inevitably involves an arrogant claim to have access to a transcendent realm beyond the senses.²⁰ But the notion

of objectivity does not require appeal to such transcendence: I learn the falsehood of (some of) my perceptions not through access to a non-perceptual world but rather through correcting them by *other* perceptions. And such corrections have an essentially intersubjective character, since on my own there would rarely be occasion for them to be made. The real source of my self-correction comes from *others*: I discover the difference between 'the way things seem to me' and 'the way things are' not by grasping some noumenal realm but rather by discovering the difference between 'the way things seem to me' and 'the way things seem to *you*', a discovery that leads us both to be more sceptical about our own perceptual experiences, and might lead us to work together co-operatively to try to get them to cohere a bit better.

And that co-operative activity, in which we attempt to stabilise our perceptions by trying them out from many different perspectives, itself crucially involves language. As the coin seems to fly from one hand to the other, we onlookers might start to talk: 'did you see *that*?' 'Did that coin really move?' 'Was he palming one of those coins?' 'Were you watching both hands?' If the trick is repeated, we might decide to have some people watch one hand and others the other, attending to details in an attempt to achieve a less 'promiscuous' perception, in a plan that requires language both to be formulated and to be carried out. All this chatter among the spectators, though, as we try to figure out how the trick is done, is really an attempt to make up for the silence of the magician, the silence that makes the trick possible. The key question isn't 'how did he do that?' but 'how did *you* do that?'; it is in his refusal to answer that question that the vague disreputability (and, to be sure, the exciting transgressiveness) of the magician lies. He *tricks* us, because he both knows something that we do not know – something that would allow us to correct our perception – *and* refuses to tell it to us: in this sense his act has something faintly immoral about it.²¹

The intersubjectivity of language use, that is, allows us to correct our perceptions by checking them against the perceptions of others. But this kind of language use is a matter neither of 'expression' nor of 'response', nor even of 'participation' in the sense in which Abram uses this word: rather it is a matter of a co-operative project among interlocutors in which assertions are made and checked in order to determine something about what the world is like. Wolves do not do this sort of thing, so far as I know, and neither do birds; neither, for that matter, do trees or winds or brooks. The sounds made *by* such entities might serve as information *about* how the world is, *for* the intersubjectively co-operating interlocutors who hear those sounds, or who think they hear them; but such entities do not *themselves* take part in the project of making and testing assertions about the world and thereby coming to know it better that language makes possible.

THE SILENCE OF NATURE

III

Abram thinks that in the modern world we have forgotten how to hear the speech of nature, and that one of the major culprits in bringing about that forgetting was the invention of alphabetic writing.²² Where language remains tied to sound, he suggests, its connection to direct sensory experience of the environment is explicit and obvious. Spoken language is at its basis onomatopoeic, and thus appears to those who speak it as continuous with the larger sonorous expressiveness of the natural world. Even pictographic writing retains this connection, as the signs for words still resemble the things to which the words refer. But with the development of phonetic writing that connection to the lifeworld of sense experience is lost. For written words are now made up of letters that refer not to the things those words describe, but rather simply to the sounds *we* make when we say the words: the reference, that is, is no longer to something outside of us but rather merely to ourselves. The consequence, Abram writes, is that with the invention of the alphabet 'a new distance opens between human culture and the rest of nature'.²³

By severing the direct connection between language and sensory experience, Abram argues, phonetic writing helps produce in those who use it a reflexivity about language that leads to a solipsism that treats language as exclusively human and humans as outside of nature. By separating words from the things they name, written language makes it possible to think about words as such, to ask about their meanings, and to make what Abram views as the fateful mistake of thinking of those meanings as independent of the world of sense experience – as real things in their own right. No longer does meaning appear to come from the world: instead it appears as something *we* human speakers make possible, through our ability to transcend immediate sense-experience and discover a deeper realm beyond it. Abstraction, distrust of the senses, the reification of words and concepts into eternal Ideas – the whole Platonic heritage of the West – can on Abram's view be seen as the consequences of that alienation from the lived experience of nature that alphabetic writing brings in its train.

I think that this is a highly interesting and suggestive account, and that Abram is likely right about the role phonetic writing might have played in the development by language-users of conceptual capacities having to do with abstraction, reflexivity, the distinction between words and things, the idea that meaning is a human construct, and so forth. I think he is wrong, though, to see the development of such capacities as a kind of Fall, in which humans left the Edenic pre-literate world of direct experience and participation in nature to enter the sinful world of abstract thinking and alienation from the lifeworld.²⁴ For the self-reflection, the grasping of language *as* language, that phonetic writing may indeed have made possible might better be described as the recognition by language users of something that was true *all the time* – something that is true for that matter of spoken language too, only harder to notice. Speech may begin

in onomatopoeia, but it does not remain there long; the element of arbitrariness, and hence the implicit reference to human construction, occurs in speech as well as in writing. Spoken words get their meaning not directly from anything in the environment but from the language and the social context in which they are embedded, yet in their fluidity and impermanence it is hard to hear them for what they are. The speakers of a purely oral language might well believe that the names they give to things are intrinsic to the things themselves, are (so to speak) their *true* names; the idea that speakers of other languages may name things differently might be difficult to grasp. Phonetic writing, for just the sorts of reasons Abram adduces, makes this mistake less likely. The written word no longer even pretends to refer directly to the thing, but rather to a spoken sound, and so its fully arbitrary and social character is out in the open. The reflexivity that writing affords is thus a species of self-knowledge: through it, we are able to overcome the illusion that words and things are one, or that there is such a thing as a 'true' name.

Abram repeatedly associates oral language with the direct and immediate while associating writing with the mediated and abstract. But language *is* mediation; there is no such thing as direct or immediate speech. The abstraction and the distance between subject and object that Abram sees as the product of phonetic writing were always already there, even in purely oral languages. His own examples show this. When he writes of pre-literate hunters who mimic partridge calls to lure the birds out of the bush, or who imitate the sound of a baby monkey in trouble to induce a monkey band to come down from the trees in which they're hiding, he seems not to realise that these are already examples of 'abstraction': even in such cases of onomatopoeia, a distance has opened up between the sound and the thing, and it is precisely this distance on which the speaker counts.²⁵ Similarly, it is puzzling when Abram contrasts written with oral narratives by arguing that the former, because they can be removed from the place where the narrated events first occurred, make possible an increasingly abstract conception of space in which 'the felt power and personality of particular places begins to fade'.²⁶ For spoken stories too are surely often recounted at some distance from the place where the events occurred. The abstraction involved does not derive from writing but rather is implicit in language itself, which from the very start *requires* a distance between the speaker and the thing spoken about, and thus reveals to speakers the possibility of referring to objects that are not present (or, as in the case of the hunters, were never present).

What writing does is to make that distance explicit, to allow it to be thematised. By removing the illusion that spoken words connect immediately with things, writing discloses language's essentially arbitrary and artefactual character. But far from being a fall, I am arguing, the invention of phonetic writing represented the discovery by humans of something important both about language and about themselves. Afterwards, words no longer appear as the direct and incontestable expression of things themselves, but rather as what they are: the expression

THE SILENCE OF NATURE

of a fallible subject conveying a particular view of the world. Writing fosters scepticism: to recognise the arbitrary character of language and its connection to a subject is also to recognise the possibility and the necessity of questioning what is said in it. The explicit reference of phonetic writing to the voice of a speaker (rather than to the thing itself) makes it easier to ask who that speaker is – to acknowledge, that is, the subjectivity that speaks or writes in each case, and thus also to realise the perspectival, and possibly mistaken, character of what is said. It raises the question of the speaker's reliability and veracity, and hence teaches us not always to believe everything that we read or hear. More broadly, it raises the question of the truth of what is said, and of how that truth could best be determined. If we mistakenly see language as the direct expression of things around us – as a purely oral language perhaps encourages us to do – then the issue of truth never arises; we simply believe what we are told. The distance and self-reflection that writing makes possible might thus be key steps towards developing a critical attitude towards the speech of others (and of ourselves).

Thus the reflexivity about language encouraged by phonetic writing might help support the (valuable) idea that all truth-claims can and ought to be questioned. But questioning is always the questioning *of* someone who has asserted something, and so with this idea we return to the notion of language use as conversation. The reflexivity brought about by writing is in this sense an *intersubjective* reflexivity. Abram sees Socrates as the key example of what happens after the invention of the alphabet allows words to be examined as words, thereby making possible questions about what 'virtue', or 'justice' *mean*, questions that Abram argues would not have made any sense before the development of writing.²⁷ But it is odd to associate the Socratic dialectic with writing, given that Socrates never wrote anything; surely its real conceptual significance derives not from writing but from *dialogue*. Socrates challenges his fellow-Athenians to explain and to defend the claims that they make in their speech, claims that heretofore they had been accustomed to making in stock and traditional phrases without danger of interruption or dispute, and he (shockingly) questions whether what they say is actually true. It is only through such dialogue, his example suggests, in which we do not merely express our own views but also critically question each other's views and respond in turn to those criticisms, that we can come mutually to understand better the world we all inhabit.

Abram is appalled at Socrates' remark in the *Phaedrus* that he rarely leaves the city because 'I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do.'²⁸ For Abram the idea that one cannot learn from nature is evidence of the arrogance and anthropocentrism that alphabetic writing makes possible – 'a vivid indicator', he writes, 'of the extent to which the human senses in Athens had already withdrawn from direct participation with the natural landscape'.²⁹ Inhabitants of pre-literate cultures, he claims, would have trouble understanding Socrates' point, because 'such com-

munities necessarily take their most profound teachings or instructions directly from the more-than-human earth'.³⁰ But this fails to see what Socrates means by 'learning', which is surely *not* 'taking instructions' from anything. Indeed, it is the very idea that one learns about the world by 'taking instruction' about it that the Socratic dialectic is meant to explode: one learns not by accepting what one is told about the world but rather by questioning what is said about it, by asking one's interlocutor to explain his or her claims and to defend them, by raising objections to those claims and discovering whether those objections can be met. Thus learning essentially involves dialogue, which means also that it essentially involves the possibility of disagreeing, of criticising, of discovering that what one has been told was wrong. But it is just that possibility that is missing when one's 'interlocutor' is a tree or open country – *they* cannot be questioned the way that Euthyphro or Meno or Thrasymachus can, and so there's no chance of evaluating and testing whatever 'profound teachings' they might be thought to provide.

IV

Language, I have been arguing, is essentially dialogue, conversation. If we want to understand the relationship between language and ethics, then, we need to pay attention to the ethics of conversation. For conversation does indeed have an ethics, tacitly accepted by anyone who engages in it. It is an ethics of *reciprocity*, based on the fundamental symmetry of dialogue, as interlocutors constantly alternate between the position of speaker and hearer, and acknowledge that what is permissible (or obligatory) for me as speaker must also be permissible (or obligatory) for you as speaker as well, and that the same is true for each of us as hearers. One expects sincerity from one's interlocutor, for example, and so to be engaged in conversation is to be committed to being sincere oneself. One expects one's interlocutor to be attempting to speak the truth, and so one is committed to attempting to do so as well. And, crucially, one expects that what one's interlocutor says is something he or she has good reason to believe, and expects therefore that if challenged he or she could justify it; and thus again one must be committed oneself to be able to provide justifications for one's own assertions. To speak is to make claims about the way the world is, but to make such claims is at the same time implicitly to promise that if challenged one could explain why one thinks the claims are true. In conversation one is responsible, therefore, for what one says – for genuinely believing it, first of all, but also for being able to provide reasons to justify that belief. And that responsibility is an intersubjective one: it is a responsibility *to* one's interlocutor, which the interlocutor at any moment has the right to ask one to redeem. *This* is what 'responding' to the other means: not simply hearing the other's claims, but also

THE SILENCE OF NATURE

and most importantly acknowledging and answering the other's questions and requests for justification.

This ethic of reciprocity and responsibility, of questioning and justification, is central, it seems to me, to the ethical meaning of language. But it is an ethic that the natural entities whose 'speech' Abram and Friskics want us to notice do not and in fact cannot acknowledge. If they were really interlocutors of ours, they would be called irresponsible ones, because they never respond to our questions by offering explanations or justifications of their claims; indeed they never even acknowledge that those questions have been asked. But of course they are not irresponsible interlocutors, because they are not interlocutors at all. They do not engage in dialogue or conversation with us, and in this sense as I have already suggested it is simply a category mistake to assert that they speak. The notion that in speaking one implicitly takes on the responsibility to speak the truth and to justify what one says is one that seems to have no meaning for them. Nor does the notion that they might ask us humans to justify our own claims. Indeed it is the very notion of a 'claim' that they seem to be lacking.

But then a danger arises if we treat non-human entities as if they *were* interlocutors, as if they *were* making claims – the danger that such claims, just because they can't in fact be questioned, will be treated as *unquestionable* in the sense of being unquestionably *true*. Abram offers a fascinating discussion of storytelling in several pre-alphabetic cultures that emphasises the normative role played in those cultures by landscape. Thus the Dreamtime songs and stories of Australian aboriginal peoples, he writes, 'provide the codes of behavior for the community; they suggest, through multiple examples, how to act, or how *not* to act, in particular situations.... [They] offer a ready set of guidelines for proper behavior on the part of those who sing or hear those stories today.... And it is the land itself that is the most potent reminder of these teachings, since each feature in the landscape activates the memory of a particular story or cluster of stories.'³¹ Indeed, as Abram emphasises, it is the land itself that is understood as the speaker, or singer, of these tales. Yet because the 'speech' engaged in by a landscape can never be *dialogue* in the sense I have described it above, lacking as it does in particular any acknowledgment by the 'speaker' of the ethical responsibility to speak the truth and to be able to justify its assertions, its claim to normative authority seems unwarranted. What reasons are there to believe that the 'code of behavior for the community' provided by the Dreamtime stories and songs is *right*? (What are gender relations like in this society, for instance? How are strangers supposed to be treated, or the disabled, or those who do not believe in the stories?) Could the code ever be questioned? My point isn't that the code here is *not* right (I have no idea), but rather that when normative claims are understood as being made by a *landscape* and not by a human speaker, the possibility even of raising such a question cannot arise.

In this sense if the invention of phonetic writing made it harder to see the landscape as something that could speak, and thus harder to see it as something

whose normative claims should be taken seriously, then perhaps the invention of phonetic writing was not such a bad thing. The self-reflexivity regarding language Abram sees writing as instituting, as well as the recognition that all speech is the speech *of* a particular fallible speaker that such reflexivity might foster, and the resulting scepticism that will accept no claim as true unless good reasons can be given for it, might lead to the realisation that normative claims require justification and that the impossibility of questioning a landscape about its claims means that those claims (and the traditional social arrangements that lie behind them) lack such justification, and so must be treated as unproven and possibly false. To see that a landscape cannot be a responsible interlocutor, and that the normative claims attributed to it require a justification it cannot provide, is to begin to raise questions about where those claims in fact really come from, and what political function they really serve.

Such questions come closer to the surface in another example Abram gives, of a type of Apache narrative called '*agodzaahi*'. These are brief stories meant to illustrate a moral point, he says, and are always tied specifically to a particular location where they are supposed to have taken place.³² 'The telling of such a tale', Abram writes, today 'is always prompted by a misdeed committed by someone in the community'; at some communal event an elder will tell the story in such a way that the person at fault will know himself or herself to be the target, and ever afterward when that person passes by that location he or she will be reminded of the story.³³ Abram takes this as illustrating his general point that pre-literate societies such as the Apache find speech everywhere, and do not distinguish between humans and non-humans as speakers.³⁴ 'Places are never just passive settings', he writes. 'A particular place in the land is never, for an oral culture, just a passive or inert setting for the human events that occur there. *It is an active participant in those occurrences.*'³⁵ But to say that something is a *participant* is not to say that it is a *speaker*; speaking, as we have seen, requires dialogue and the possibility of justification. Yet of course there *is* a speaker, a human speaker, of the '*agodzaahi*' story, but Abram glosses over this fact, as perhaps do the Apache: it is the elder, after all, not the landscape, who actually tells the story. In doing so, however, this human speaker—like a sleight of hand magician, or more accurately like a ventriloquist—makes it seem that something else, the place, is doing the speaking, thereby removing from the real speaker the responsibility to be able to justify the normative claims he or she is making. Those claims thus appear as facts of nature, built into the landscape, instead of as what they really are: the questionable claims of a fallible human being within a particular social order. A truth-claim is being made, a speech act is taking place, but the real speaker is being systematically hidden, and his or her voice is being thrown in a move we're familiar with from the *Wizard of Oz*: the speaker here is depending on an illusion to avoid the obligation to be responsible for defending what he or she says.

THE SILENCE OF NATURE

In language use something is asserted (1) *about* the world, (2) *by* a subject. (1) means the assertion has content, and can be true, while (2) means – since subjects are necessarily limited in perspective and therefore fallible – that the assertion can also be false, and deserves to be questioned and tested. In the Dreamtime and *'agodzaahi* examples, however, the truth-telling and contentful character of language is employed but its fallible character, the fact that the assertions being made are *merely* assertions and so might be false, is being hidden, because the real speaker is being hidden. *This* is the deepest danger in the idea that non-human entities can speak – and it is a political danger. Because they speak no human language, in order to understand what they say we need people to ‘translate’ for us: and yet what claims to be a translator might turn out to be nothing but a *ventriloquist*, and we have no way to distinguish one from the other.³⁶ Abram speaks repeatedly about the importance in pre-literate cultures of special figures like shamans or magicians who serve as ‘intermediaries’ between the human and the non-human world, and emphasises the power such a position entails.³⁷ But it is hard not to glimpse here a political meaning quite different from the one he emphasises – a meaning about the power of the shamans *over* those in their community, deriving precisely from their claimed role as ‘intermediaries’ or translators. An intermediary is necessarily very powerful, especially if there is no possibility of direct contact with the thing it claims to be mediating for us.

This is what happens when things are said to speak that many of us find ourselves unable to hear: a special class of hearers appears whose members claim to be able to translate for the rest of us, to ‘channel’ the otherwise incomprehensible words of those things. To be a member of that class is then inevitably to hold a special sort of power, not open to questioning nor amenable to justification. The claims those ‘intermediaries’ make, whether about how we ought to behave or about how the world is, are supposedly not their own: they are merely made through them, by the apparently wordless entities that the intermediaries have miraculously learned to understand, and so they are not claims for which the intermediaries need take any responsibility. But precisely for this reason they are claims we ought to be suspicious of, and we ought to be suspicious too that the ones who claim merely to be translating are really the ones speaking – speaking, without acknowledging responsibility for what is said. The power to command without the responsibility to justify: that is the power of the shaman, and it is a power of which we ought to be sceptical. *We* have learned that scepticism, we users of the alphabet. Unlike Abram, I do not think we need to be ashamed of having done so.

V

Justification and persuasion are connected. To make an assertion in a conversation, I have argued, is implicitly to promise to be able to justify it to the person with whom one is talking, but that can only mean: to be able in principle to persuade that person of its truth. Justification is intrinsically intersubjective: there is no such thing as a private justification. I do not have good reasons for my beliefs – and thus ought not to be asserting them as true – unless I have reasons that I think could eventually convince *you* as well. This means that my commitment to be able to provide justification for my truth claims is at the same time a commitment to acknowledge the capacity of my interlocutors to pass judgment on those claims, and a willingness to accept those judgments.

In this sense the ethics of language entails an ethics of *respect*. As long as you and I are engaged in a dialogic relation, I cannot deny the relevance of your views to the question of the truth of my own, which means that I must acknowledge and respect your intelligence, your autonomy, and your capacity to make judgments. I show respect for you by telling you the truth about what I believe, and by acknowledging that the justifiability of my truth-claims depends upon your being able to accept them. And this is so no matter who you are, as long as you are engaged or even potentially engaged in conversation with me. If I assert something in my speech that could never be acceptable to some potential interlocutors, something that I myself admit they would never agree to (by suggesting, say, that their agreement doesn't matter, or that they are too stupid to understand, or too irrational, or that some higher social good would be achieved if they were simply ignored), then I have engaged in a performative contradiction, asserting something in my speech act that the act itself contradicts.³⁸

At the same time, when I claim something to be true, I am asserting its *truth*: I am not merely asserting that I and whoever happens to hear me at this moment have all agreed to it. It is not a factual agreement that my truth-claim posits, but rather an open-ended possibility: that *anyone* who heard my claim would eventually come to accept it, that *any* question about it could be adequately answered, that *any* objection to it could be countered. This means that in speaking I undertake to accept nothing as true myself (and further, to *assert* nothing as true) unless it is in principle acceptable to all hearers. In this sense something like the Kantian notion of universalisation is central to the ethics of language use. As soon as a speaker begins to talk, a universal community is implicitly posited by her speech – the community of those who might respond to the speech, who might agree or disagree with it, and whose eventual agreement she implicitly promises when she claims that such and such is in fact the case.³⁹ The community posited by language-use is in this sense an unbounded one, consisting as it does of *all* potential partners in dialogue.

There is no a priori reason to believe that only humans can be members of this community. The question of which entities are potential partners in dia-

THE SILENCE OF NATURE

logue in the sense I have described is an empirical one. Yet what I have been arguing is that nothing in Friskics's or Abram's accounts shows that the non-human entities they discuss *are* such partners. They may actively participate in helping to constitute our experience of the world, their sounds and actions may inform us of important characteristics of the world, some of them may indeed give us expressive indication of their feelings about the world, but they do not *say* anything to us about the world, do not make truth-claims about the world, and are under no implicit ethical obligation to be truthful, to provide justifications, or to respect their interlocutors. In neither Friskics's nor Abram's texts do non-human entities appear as participants with us in the co-operative dialogic project of attempting to figure out how the world is and how we ought to act in it. Instead, as we have seen, they are presented as 'calling' to us, as oracularly prophesying to us, as a source of normative lessons that may not be questioned and are not amenable to justification.

Nor does either author suggest that cultures claiming to hear the speech of non-human entities understand the ethical relationship to those entities as like the one existing between partners in dialogue.⁴⁰ The relations with non-human 'speakers' they describe seem either to involve passive obedience to authority or else to be based on trickery and deception. It is striking how frequently Abram's examples of premodern humans communicating with natural entities involve those humans *violating* the ethics of language. Amazon Indians (as we have already seen) mimic the sounds of animals in order to lure them out of hiding, and imitate those sounds in order to conceal their own presence from possible predators.⁴¹ The Koyukon avoid using the names of certain animals aloud, because if the animals heard themselves spoken of it might bring bad luck. A Koyukon woman warns a visitor never to say aloud that he will catch a fish, adding 'the most you should say is that you'll *try* to catch a fish, or better yet, don't say anything at all. Otherwise it sounds like you're bragging, and the animals always stay away from people who talk like that.'⁴² Although such examples doubtless confirm Abram's claim that in such societies non-humans are viewed as capable of language, it is noteworthy that the 'linguistic' relations between humans and non-humans seem to depend on lying, on strategic circumlocution, on ventriloquism, or on silence, and not on anything like *dialogue* (in which questions about, for example, the rightness or wrongness of hunting and trying to kill one's interlocutors would seem necessarily to arise).⁴³ The relations here are quite different, that is, from the ones that presumably exist among the human members of these societies themselves, who *are* engaged in a co-operative and linguistically mediated project of trying to figure out the world. If we were to take seriously the idea that the non-humans in these examples were indeed language-users in the full-blooded ethical sense, these would seem in fact to be examples of immorality, of a failure to acknowledge and live up to one's ethical obligations. But we do not take that idea seriously, nor do members of the societies who engage in such behaviour, and surely there is no immorality

in their behaviour – or if there is, it has nothing to do with their mendacious use of language. The ethical obligations towards our interlocutors we undertake when we begin to engage in conversation simply *do not arise* in the relations between humans and the ‘more-than-human world’, because in fact we do *not* converse with entities from that world, and they are *not* our interlocutors. Friskies and Abram want to suggest that we have somehow tragically *lost* the ability to converse with such entities, but their examples fail to show that that ability was ever there in the first place.

I began this essay by suggesting that those who claimed that nature could speak were asserting a connection between language and ethics, recognising that we have a special ethical obligation towards our fellow-speakers and insisting that non-human entities too are fellow-speakers. But I have been arguing that a close examination of the connection that *does* exist between language and ethics reveals ethically crucial elements to be missing from what such authors claim is nature’s ‘speech’. Either non-human entities cannot accurately be said to speak, or else their speech does not have the ethical significance these authors want to claim for it. Unable to take responsibility for their ‘assertions’ or to provide justifications for them to their ‘interlocutors’, such entities are not really making any assertions at all, nor do they really have any interlocutors at all either. Thus they stand under no ethical obligation to their ‘fellow-speakers’, for in fact they have none. And if we, who do speak and do have interlocutors, have an ethical obligation towards *them*, it does not derive from their character as fellow-speakers.

VI

I distinguished earlier between *translators* and *ventriloquists*. Translators, in my sense, are those who speak for *another speaker*, saying the words that speaker is for whatever reason unable to speak herself (possibly, but not necessarily, because her language is different from ours). A ventriloquist, on the other hand, is someone who speaks for something that is *not* a speaker, projecting her own words onto a mute object and then pretending that it is that object that is speaking and not herself. Ventriloquism, like sleight-of-hand magic, can be entertaining, but again like magic there is something potentially immoral about it if the practitioner does not own up to what is going on. This is because there is a certain privilege granted to first-person reports in dialogue. My obligation to respect my interlocutors, which derives from my obligation to be able to persuade them of the truth of my assertions, requires me to assume the accuracy of their reports about their own beliefs: I may try to convince them that their opinions are *wrong*, but in conversation with them it makes no sense for me to claim that these opinions are not *theirs*, that they do not really hold them.⁴⁴ But when my interlocutor is no interlocutor at all, but rather a speechless entity

THE SILENCE OF NATURE

(let's call it a dummy) mouthing the words of another, then what seem to be first-person reports are really third-person reports, and third-person reports have no such privilege.⁴⁵

This is so even if the ventriloquist is sincerely expressing what she believes the dummy *ought* to be saying, or even *would* be saying if dummies could talk. For in the case of third-person reports, the question of the accuracy of the report is absolutely relevant. When I talk to you about the validity of some truth-claim one of us has made, we must assume – if this is a real dialogue – the sincerity of each of our expressions of our views. Those assumptions serve as the background conditions for our talk, and without them the talk could not take place. But when I talk to you about some *other* party, about what that party believes or what is best for that party, then these matters are themselves the topic of our talk; no longer a background condition for our assertions, they are part of the content of those assertions, and their truth is precisely what we are concerned in the discussion to decide. To give one person's claims about those matters a privilege would be to pre-decide the conversation's outcome, and thus would be to render it superfluous.

Now sometimes in a conversation one of the parties is unable to speak, for what are essentially contingent reasons. It may be because the party speaks a different language, or it may be because the party is at the moment unable to speak at all, due perhaps to some sort of physical or social disability. In either case some other party may sometimes speak *for* the incapacitated one, saying the words the latter party would be saying if she were not currently unable to speak. We might call such a speaker a translator, expanding the normal meaning of the term only slightly. The speech of such a translator – speech that occurs within quotation marks, one might say – is no doubt a third-person report too, and hence does not enjoy the privilege that a speaker's direct speech possesses. And surely such reports may be mistaken or mendacious. Yet we know what it would mean for such a report to be false: a bad translator is one whose account of someone else's speech fails to present accurately what was said (or, in the case of disability, what *would* be said if the person were not disabled). And we know – in principle, anyway – how to decide the question of accuracy: we would simply ask the (real) speaker herself whether the translator correctly reported her speech. (In practice, of course, such a procedure requires our or the speaker's learning a new language, or requires the disability to be removed, but both those things are surely possible in principle.) And if the speaker says yes, the translation was correct, then the speaker has thereby taken upon herself the speech, removed it from the quotation marks, and so turned it from a third-person report to a first-person one. In the case of translation, that is, the question of the adequacy of the translation, which is to say of the truth of the third-person report, always points back towards the possibility of a first-person report. This is the ethical basis of translation: the translator's implicit claim to

the accuracy of the translation is always founded upon the possibility, at least in principle, of replacing it by first-person speech.

But in the case of ventriloquism this possibility is not there. The dummy does not and cannot engage in first-person speech, not even in principle. The question of mendacity or even of error does not arise: it would be a category mistake to accuse a ventriloquist of *incorrectly* or *misleadingly* expressing the views of the dummy. The danger – which I have suggested earlier is a political danger – arises when a *ventriloquist presents herself as being a translator*, pretending to speak for an entity who is merely contingently unable to speak rather than throwing her own voice onto something speechless. For the ethical basis of translation – its foundation on the possibility in principle of being replaced by first-person speech – means that we are justified in treating the translator's words with the same respect we give the words of other speakers, subject naturally to a fallibilist understanding that the translation may turn out to be inaccurate. But the words of a ventriloquist do not deserve such respect, because there is no first-person speaker to whom they ultimately refer. The political danger arises when we are led to grant the ventriloquist's words (which we mistakenly think of as the words of the dummy) the same respect we grant the words of real speakers, because in doing so the ventriloquist gets a power other speakers do not have: the power to make truth-claims without the responsibility to provide first-person justifications for them.

My reference to the 'accuracy' of translations might lead to an objection here. There is of course no such thing as an accurate translation if we mean by that term something like a perfect expression of exactly what the speaker meant to say. Not even the speaker herself is capable of such a thing. Accuracy in this sense is impossible not merely because two languages are always different and thus never entirely intertranslatable, but because even within the speaker's own language the question of what her words mean can only be answered within a hermeneutic context. The translator has no direct access to the speaker's meaning, but rather must come to understand it in the circular process thinkers such as Heidegger and Gadamer have emphasised. That process is one in which dialogue plays a crucial role, as the translator asks the speaker to explain what she means, raises questions about the use of certain terms, tries through the back-and-forth of conversation to get a clearer sense of what the speaker intends. The speaker's answers to these questions too will require further understanding, which may require further questions – and so forth. The structure here is a familiar one. But to remark on it is also to recall that it is not unique to translation. The hermeneutic situation of trying to understand another's words, and of having nothing other than other words to use to develop that understanding, is built into *all* dialogic use of language. And this is precisely why the ultimate reference to first-person language use is crucial. For when I try to understand the meaning of words I must take them to be the words *of* someone; the hermeneutic process I engage in is a process of trying to come to understand what they meant *to* the person

THE SILENCE OF NATURE

who spoke them. In a case where the actual speaker is merely a translator, the person I am trying to understand, of course, is not that translator but the person whose speech is being translated. But in the case of a ventriloquist pretending to be a translator, on the other hand, there *is* no person whom I am trying to understand, and so the process of understanding is blocked.

A ventriloquist, I am suggesting, is something different from a deceptive translator. A deceptive translator tells us things about someone's intended meanings that could at least in principle be discovered to be wrong. A ventriloquist tells us things about the intended meanings of someone who in fact intends no meanings at all. The deceptive translator could be unmasked were the real speaker to find a way to enter the conversation – not to tell us what she 'really' means (because there's no such thing) but rather simply by beginning the hermeneutic dialogue where we work out together what we mutually believe. The ventriloquist cannot be unmasked in this sense, because there's no one to do the unmasking – no 'real speaker' to enter the conversation and reclaim her words for herself. What makes something a dummy – an object of ventriloquial action – and not simply someone who is being mistranslated, that is, is that rather than someone incorrectly speaking for it now, it is the sort of thing that could *never speak for itself* – because first-person speech by it is not even possible *in principle*.

But this is the situation of animals, and birds, and mountains, and the other natural entities that Abram and Friskies discuss. Their incapacity to enter into dialogue with us – into, that is, a hermeneutically structured conversation oriented towards mutually figuring out what the world is like – means that any claim to speak for them is necessarily a ventriloquial claim. When someone claims to speak *for* a non-human entity, the problem is not that we do not know whether the speaker is doing so accurately but rather that we do not even know what accuracy means here, for there is no possibility even in principle of asking the entity being spoken for if it would accept the claim as its own. Any attempt to check the putative translation would simply require another translation, by another speaker. The ultimate reference to a first-person report is missing. The difficulty isn't that there's a kind of deep uncertainty as to whether the people who claim to speak for animals or other non-human entities are correctly representing them, it's that the notion of representation itself doesn't make sense here, because something can only be represented if it is in principle possible for it *not* to be represented but rather to speak for itself. And that's exactly what's not possible in the case of these non-human entities: it's not that they speak very softly, or speak some other language with a particularly complex syntax that only certain experts can grasp, it's that they do not speak *at all*, and so translation is not the right model for what goes on when humans attempt to tell us what they are supposed to be saying.

VII

To say that non-human entities in nature do not speak, it is important to note, is not to say that they do not possess intrinsic value, or that they do not have rights, or that they do not deserve human care or protection, or that they are mere means for our human ends. It does not mean that we have no ethical duties towards them, or that they possess no moral status. There may be lots of very good reasons to believe that such entities are valuable in their own right, and that the traditional assumption within Western ethics that the only significant ethical relationships are ones among humans is mistaken. All I have been arguing is that the claim that 'nature speaks' does not provide such a good reason, because in fact nature does *not* speak, at least not if 'speech' is understood as involving the kind of dialogue that grounds the link between language and ethics.

As far as we know, only humans speak in this sense. But then, since language *is* linked to ethics, there is no avoiding the implication that humans possess a moral status that as far as we know is unique. As we humans speak with each other, the moral relationship that arises between us is different from any that may arise between us and the non-speaking entities we encounter. Yet to say that we possess a unique moral status because we speak is not to assert a metaphysically based anthropocentrism. That humans seem to be the only animals who use language is a contingent fact of the world, and one that we could certainly imagine discovering to be false. (But for us to discover it to be false some non-human entities would have to speak *with* us, and speak *for themselves*; and this, I have been claiming, they at the moment seem not to do.) And it is not to assert a metaphysically based logocentrism either. My point is not that humans are an especially wonderful species, or that being able to use language is an especially wonderful characteristic, and that therefore humans or language-users are due an especially grand degree of ethical respect. It is that questions of ethics arise *in* language, and can only be resolved there, and that there is no way around this fact. I am using language *now*, as I write these words, just as Abram does in his book and Friskies in his article, and just as critics of anthropocentrism and logocentrism do when they offer their criticisms: the inevitable role of speech and speakers in ethics cannot be eliminated, nor plausibly ignored.

The project of coming to determine our obligations to nature, of deciding whether and to what extent it deserves our respect and care, is itself part of the broader intersubjective project by which language users come to learn about the world. Claims about how we ought to treat nature, and indeed claims about whether nature speaks or not, are themselves claims raised *in* language, and thus are subject to language's (ethical) requirement that such claims be defended and justified through the giving of reasons in a dialogue where all participants are treated equally and with respect. Such a dialogue, however, is one in which non-human entities seem not to be able to take part. Until such entities are capable of making and defending claims, we humans have no choice but to raise and

THE SILENCE OF NATURE

discuss claims about them ourselves – not because we prefer ourselves or think we're at the centre of the moral world, but because we seem to be the only ones talking here and we don't know how to figure out what's true without talking.

There's no alternative, I'm suggesting, to us language-users as the arbiters of ethical questions. We have no special access to ethical truths beyond the ones we come to in our conversations. *I don't know* the answer to the question of what sort of moral respect animals or other non-human entities deserve, and so I discuss the question with *whomever I can*, not limiting my discussion partners to members of any particular species nor in any other way pre-deciding it: and it turns out that the only entities with whom discussion is possible (so far) are humans. The mountain and the wind and the wolf make no claims about the question, and certainly don't offer any justifications; nor do they respond to my claims either by questioning them or by pronouncing themselves persuaded; and so they offer no discursive help to me with respect to my question.⁴⁶ I discuss it with those with whom I can discuss it; there's nothing else I can do. And if some humans tell me that natural entities do have things to say about the issue, as Abram and Friskics (and according to Abram, the shamans) do, then – since I myself don't hear it – I have to ask *them*, those humans, what it is that the non-human entities are saying: which puts us back into the problem of translators and ventriloquists, and in any case leaves us still within a discussion among humans.

The 'silence of nature', then, simply means this: that there's no way to avoid or short-circuit the necessity of discourse and the giving of reasons to decide what our ethical duties are, and that nature's inability to take part in that discussion entails that our duties to nature, rather than arising implicitly *in* that discussion, must themselves be a subject matter *of* that discussion. And to say that is already to say that nature cannot help but have a different moral status from those who use language to try to figure out what moral status it has. The duties we owe to nature are not the ones we owe to fellow-speakers, but rather ones we and our fellow-speakers mutually determine, in a discursive process that depends upon (and grounds) an ethical relationship among us in which nature does not share. As we speak, we implicitly acknowledge reciprocal responsibilities to provide justifications, to respect the first-person authority of those who offer such justifications, and to accept nothing as true that could never be found persuasive by all those taking part in the discussion; those responsibilities are prior, I have been arguing, to any that we may decide we have towards those who do not take part in it, because we only come to know the latter through that discussion.

Phenomenological accounts share a danger with ventriloquism: the danger of employing the privilege accorded first-person reports without taking on the responsibility of justifying and if necessary correcting the claims such reports entail. At bottom Abram and Friskics are really asserting that *it sounds to them* like nature is speaking, an assertion I have no reason to question. They conclude from that too quickly, though, that nature *is* speaking, and that if the rest

of us listened more carefully we would hear it too. I have listened carefully, I think, and I hear nothing. What status does my claim have, over and against theirs, and how should one decide between them? At one point Abram offers a loving phenomenological description of watching a blackbird in a bush and writes that the experience involves all his senses in a synaesthetic way, adding for instance that ‘as [the bird] squoones each new berry in its beak, a slightly acidic taste burst[s] within my mouth. Or rather, strangely, I seem to feel this burst of taste over there, in *its* mouth, yet I feel its mouth only with my own.’⁴⁷ When I first read this I did not know what to think of it, except that such an experience is simply not one I have ever had. I know what it tastes like to eat a berry, and can imagine what it tastes like to someone else, possibly even to a bird; but my experience of watching some other human or bird eat a berry is simply not anything like the experience of eating one myself. I am asserting no incorrigibility to this claim, note: there may be something in my experience that I am failing to notice, and that Abram could convince me to attend to. But the same goes for him: he may be failing to see a distinction that I could convince him is really there. To decide about this we need to *talk*, Abram and I – and so once again we are back at language. Perhaps through our discussion he and I could come to learn more things about ourselves, about the bird and the berry, and about the human relationship to nature. But that discussion, maybe sadly, is one in which the blackbird itself, no matter how beautiful and evocative its song, would have no part.

NOTES

¹ The key figure in recent philosophy who has emphasised this point, of course, is Jürgen Habermas.

² Friskics 2001: 392.

³ Friskics 2001: 392.

⁴ Friskics 2001: 394.

⁵ Friskics 2001: 399.

⁶ Friskics 2001: 396.

⁷ He quotes Henry Bugbee as interpreting our relation to other beings (in an essay on Marcel) as one of ‘appel et réponse’ and then says that ‘our being-together [with such beings] might best be described in terms of a dialogue’. Yet call and response is not dialogue, but something quite different: the relation of an authoritative speaker and an awe-filled respondent. Friskics 2001: 395.

⁸ Friskics 2001: 397.

⁹ Friskics 2001: 395-6. Emphases added.

¹⁰ Abram 1996: 74.

¹¹ Abram 1996: 80. Emphasis in original.

¹² See, e.g., Abram 1996: 68, 82.

THE SILENCE OF NATURE

¹³ Abram 1996: 56.

¹⁴ Abram 1996: 52–3. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵ See Abram 1996: 90, where he moves without argument from the claims that ‘the complex interchange that we call ‘language’ is rooted in the non-verbal exchange always already going on between our own flesh and the flesh of the world’ and that ‘human languages ... are informed ... by the evocative shapes and patterns of the more-than-human terrain’ to the much stronger conclusion that ‘experientially considered, language is no more the special property of the human organism than it is an expression of the animate earth that enfolds us’. This is like arguing that because silicon chips are produced from sand, the ability to do speedy calculations is no more the special property of computers than it is of beaches.

¹⁶ Abram 1996: 80.

¹⁷ Abram 1996: 80–1.

¹⁸ And this is so, it is important to note, even when the speech act itself is not a what Austin called a constative one. ‘Give me the hammer’, for example, involves first of all the claim that there is a hammer there, and secondly that giving it to me is the right thing to do now. ‘Does that road go to Larissa?’ asserts that the thing being indicated is a road, that Larissa is a place to which roads might bring one, and furthermore that asking the question is normatively appropriate in the situation at hand. See Habermas 1984: 305 – 19.

¹⁹ Abram 1996: 58.

²⁰ Abram 1996: 94.

²¹ It’s not *really* immoral, of course, because we have implicitly consented to be tricked. If we have not, he’s not a magician but a con man, or a pickpocket.

²² Late in the book he acknowledges that it’s not the only culprit, but it’s certainly the major one he discusses. Abram 1996: 263–4.

²³ Abram 1996: 100.

²⁴ In a recent exchange with Ted Toadvine, Abram has denied that his account involves anything like a ‘fall’, claiming that this essentially Christian notion depends upon a ‘linear conception of time’ which itself has roots in alphabetic thinking (Abram 2005: 179–80). But this seems disingenuous in the extreme. The book in fact is suffused with nostalgia for what has been lost in the transition from oral societies to ones characterised by alphabetic literacy. The modern Western world is described in it as beset by evils, from environmental damage to ‘epidemic illness’, ‘widespread psychological distress’, not to speak of an ‘accelerating number of household killings and mass murders’, evils that Abram directly associates with our ‘strange inability to ... hear as meaningful anything other than human speech’ (Abram 1996: 22, 27). His goal is to understand how this has come to happen, and why we in the West have ‘become so deaf and blind to the vital existence’ of a world beyond the human one, in contrast to ‘native’ or ‘indigenous’ cultures whose members engage in a ‘more primordial, participatory mode of perception’ (Abram 1996: 27–8). And the ‘withdrawal’ of nonhuman nature ‘from both our speaking and our senses’ is explicitly described by Abram as having been precipitated by an ‘event’ – the invention of the alphabet, and the self-reflection, abstraction, and alienation from nature to which it leads. (Abram 1996: 92) An event that causes the loss of an original, native, primordial unity, and ends in alienation, despair and even death: this *is* the story of the Fall.

²⁵ Abram 1996: 142.

²⁶ Abram 1996: 183.

²⁷ Abram 1996: 111.

²⁸ *Phaedrus*, 230d. Abram, 1996: 102, 116.

²⁹ Abram 1996: 117.

³⁰ Abram 1996: 116.

³¹ Abram 1996: 175–6.

³² Abram 1996: 156–62.

³³ Abram 1996: 158–9.

³⁴ The stories, he says, ‘reside in the land’. Abram 1996: 160.

³⁵ Abram 1996: 162. Emphasis in original.

³⁶ I am grateful to my colleague David Goldblatt, through whose work in aesthetics I first realised the philosophical significance of the concept of ventriloquism – although I think we disagree fairly strongly about what the usefulness of the concept actually is. See Goldblatt 2006.

³⁷ Thus for instance Abram writes that the magician’s ‘continual engagement with the animate powers that dwell beyond the human community’ means that she possesses a special ability to cure illnesses and other ‘systemic imbalance[s]’ within the community. Abram 1996: 7. See also, e.g., 88 and 256.

³⁸ See Habermas 1990: 91.

³⁹ ‘Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus.’ Habermas 1972: 314.

⁴⁰ Friskics contrasts the modern Western ‘monologic’ approach to nature with that of traditional hunting societies. See Friskics 2001: 403–5.

⁴¹ Abram 1966: 142, 144.

⁴² Abram 1966: 151–2.

⁴³ Friskics and Abram both use pre-modern hunting as exemplifying what the former calls the ‘reciprocal’ character of the relation between the human and non-human worlds and the latter speaks of as the way they ‘interpenetrate and inform each other’ (Friskics 2001: 404; Abram 1966: 144). But the reciprocity and interpenetration here surely have nothing to do with that found in dialogue, where it entails the requirement of respect for one’s interlocutor and a commitment not to assert truth-claims unless they are potentially acceptable to all affected. It’s hard to imagine persuading an interlocutor in dialogue that he or she ought to be hunted down and killed. Compare on this point Toadvine 2005: 164 n.27.

⁴⁴ This is not to say that I cannot come to the conclusion that the opinions my interlocutors express are *not* genuinely theirs: perhaps they are joking, or under hypnosis, or repeating what they have been trained to say by the corporation they work for. But such a conclusion would mean that what we are doing can no longer be understood as engaging in *dialogue*, and so my appropriate response would be something else – to laugh, to undo the hypnosis, to speak to someone able to take (justificatory) responsibility for corporate policy.

⁴⁵ More precisely: if my conversational partner *P* asserts that *p*, it is possible to raise questions within the conversation about the truth of *p*, but not about the truth of ‘*P* believes

THE SILENCE OF NATURE

that *p*.' (Although again *outside* the conversation the latter question might be raised.) But if a ventriloquist causes it to *seem* that a dummy D is asserting that *p*, it makes perfect sense to ask (in what is after all really a conversation with the ventriloquist) about the truth of 'D believes that *p*', and even of course whether D is the sort of thing that is capable of believing or asserting anything at all.

⁴⁶ Again, they may provide me with *evidence* for or against my claims. But whether the evidence is *good* evidence I can only decide by talking to *you*, not to them.

⁴⁷ Abram 1996: 126. Emphasis in original.

REFERENCES

- Abram, David. 1996. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Abram, David. 2005. 'Between the Body and the Breathing Earth: A Reply to Ted Toadvine', *Environmental Ethics*, **27**: 171–90.
- Friskics, Scott. 2001. 'Dialogical Relations with Nature', *Environmental Ethics*, **23**: 391–410.
- Goldblatt, David. 2006. *Art and Ventriloquism*. London: Routledge.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1972. *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1990. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action I: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Plato. *Phaedrus*.
- Toadvine, Ted. 2005. 'Limits of the Flesh: The Role of Reflection in David Abram's Ecophenomenology', *Environmental Ethics*, **27**: 155–70.