EXPLORING KOHAK'S DIALOGUE WITH NATURE AS A LANGUAGE GAME

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ABSTRACT: The article provides a textual analysis of Kohak's position on human relationship with the natural world, through the lens of Wittgenstein's language games. The experiential engagement of humans and their perception of the natural world is analysed as a language game of its own, featuring the interplay between the contrasting phenomenological perspectives on the human role in the Earth's functioning; humans qua members of the ecosystem and humans as entities outside of it which shape it to their will. The article then claims that by perceiving our interactions with nature in its entirety as a language game, our internal perspective on our relationship will by necessity constitute the former one, which in turn provides for a normative shift towards taking into account nature's needs and wants. In other words, the article provides an argument for changing our views on nature towards a relationship of ethical equality, which is essential for dealing with issues pertaining to the environment reasonably.

KEYWORDS: Erazim Kohák; Ludwig Wittgenstein; Phenomenology; Language Games; Ecological ethics

INTRODUCTION

The importance of addressing our relationship with the natural world has been underscored by escalating environmental crises in recent decades. At the heart of this relationship, our understanding, and dialogue with nature play critical roles. This paper embarks on an interdisciplinary exploration, engaging with two seminal philosophical works, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and Erazim Kohak's *The Embers and the Stars*, to propose a unique interpretation of this understanding. Wittgenstein developed his philosophy of language throughout his life, culminating in his work, *Philosophical Investigations*. In it, he put forth the idea of language games, suggesting that the meaning of words and sentences is

shaped by their use in specific social contexts or 'games.' He indicated that understanding a language involves appreciating its diverse uses, its rules, and its underlying logic.

Parallelly, Kohak, in his work *The Embers and the Stars*, emphasized the necessity of a 'dialogue with nature.' His philosophy hinges on the notion that nature is not just a repository of resources but an ecosystem that we, as humans, should engage with in a deep, dialogic manner. This suggests a shift of perception of the nature and conversely of human behavior towards it.

To further explain the interesting interplay between the two philosophers, the research question guiding the analysis will be: How can our relationship with the natural environment be explained through Erazim Kohak's concept of a dialogue with nature and Wittgenstein's philosophical insights? Based on said question, a hypothesis in which our co-existence with the natural world will be seen as a language game will be proposed and tested, to serve as a guideline towards a normative standpoint on what human relationship with nature looks like.

KOHAK'S DIALOGUE WITH NATURE; A SYSTEMATIC OVERVIEW

At the heart of Erazim Kohak's *The Embers and the Stars* is the fundamental proposition that nature is not an object but an ecosystem, an ordered and meaningful totality. Nature is not a mere assortment of things or resources available for human exploitation, but an integrated, harmonious system that includes humans as an essential part. In the realm of natural sciences, this aligns with the evolutionary view of humans as subjects of natural cycles and developments, with limited capacity for independent action. Kohak's further addition is that humans have a unique position in nature due to our consciousness, which allows us to enter into a meaningful dialogue with nature. This dialogue, for Kohak, is central to our understanding of nature and our place within it.[1]

Said dialogue is a process of engagement where humans interact with nature empathetically and responsively. It is not a monologue wherein humans impose their will upon nature. Instead, it is a two-way interaction that requires humans to listen, observe, and respond to the rhythms of the natural world. This dialogue

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[1] Mateusz Salwa, 'Dialogue with Nature and the Ecological Imperative', EIDOS, vol.4, no. 1, 2008, pp. 130.

is rooted in an appreciation of nature's inherent worth, moving beyond utilitarian perspectives to recognize nature's intrinsic value. A critical aspect of Kohak's dialogue with nature is the role of direct experience.

In modern times, our interaction with nature is often mediated by technology and theoretical abstractions, distancing us from the immediacy of natural phenomena. Kohak argues that this distance undermines our understanding of nature, as true knowledge arises from direct, sensual engagement.[2] He calls for a return to the experiential, advocating that we learn from nature through active participation in it.[3] Humans should thus embrace their natural origins and position and free themselves of man-made distractions, which overshadow this important natural link. Instead of listening to the sounds of leaves and birds, we resorted to creating our own. Instead of watching the sunrise and sunset, we watch television. A fundamental experiential connection between us and nature has thus been severed and replaced by things that artificially, on the surface, provide the same inner experience – that provide excitement, or other emotions. While this might sound as a harmless step in line with humanism, as Kohak argues, it brings us further away from our natural origin, resulting in our view of nature shifting towards redundancy and our view of ourselves as being limited only by the socially created constraints to our experience.[4]

An important addition is that Kohak's dialogue with nature also extends to animals. He acknowledges the sentience of animals and includes them as integral participants in the dialogue. For Kohak, animals are not mere objects of human concern, but beings with their intrinsic value and rights, which have their own role in the natural development.[5] Recognizing the status of animals in the dialogue with nature is crucial for fostering a more empathetic and responsible attitude towards them.

To enter into a dialogue with nature, according to Kohak, involves a fundamental shift in our mindset. It requires us to relinquish our anthropocentric assumptions and adopt a more inclusive perspective, recognizing that we are part

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[2] Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars : A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* The University Of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 209-274.

[3] ibid; Daniel A Dombrowski, '*The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* by Erazim Kohák', *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*, vol. 50, no. 1, 1986, pp. 481.

[4] ibid.

[5] Kohák (n 2), 341 et seq.

of the natural world, not masters over it. This shift, Kohak argues, is not just a philosophical necessity but also an ethical imperative. It compels us to respect nature's integrity, to live in harmony with its rhythms, and to act responsibly towards all its inhabitants.[6]

Kohak also posits that engaging in a dialogue with nature can lead to profound spiritual and existential insights. He maintains that the experience of interconnectedness with nature can help us to transcend our narrow self-interests, to understand the deeper meaning of our existence, and to realize our potential for compassion and kindness. This dialogic relationship, thus, is not just about relating to nature, but also about understanding ourselves and our place in the ecosystem.

In summary, Kohak's dialogue with nature is a complex and multidimensional concept. It involves an empathetic interaction with nature, a recognition of nature's inherent worth, a focus on direct experience, an inclusion of animals, a shift in mindset, and a pathway to spiritual and existential insight. As we delve further into this concept, we will draw upon Wittgenstein's philosophical investigations to shed light on its nuances and implications.

RELEVANCE OF WITTGENSTEIN'S *PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS*: NEW MEANING FOR OUR BEHAVIOR TOWARDS NATURE

Wittgenstein has revolutionized the spheres of philosophy of language and of meaning. Central to his thought is the concept of language games, which asserts that the meaning of words is inextricably linked to their use within specific social and cultural contexts. However, the reach of Wittgenstein's philosophy extends far beyond the sphere of linguistics; it permeates diverse domains, from science and religion to art and everyday life. Wittgenstein calls us to see language games as an integral part of our broader ways of life and underscores the critical role of active participation in understanding their meanings.[7] This participatory approach resonates powerfully with Erazim Kohak's call for an active dialogue with nature, as presented in *The Embers and the Stars*.

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[6] Berel Lang, 'The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature by Erazim Kohák - the Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age by Hans Jonas University of Chicago Press', *Worldview*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1985, pp. 26.

[7] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Peter MS Hacker, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

The philosophy of language games is deeply intertwined with Wittgenstein's broader epistemological and ontological perspectives. Wittgenstein proposed that our knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions are deeply influenced by the language games humans engage in. The rules of these games, which are shaped by cultural and societal contexts, guide our linguistic expressions and imbue them with meaning.[8] Language games encompass a broad range of communicative acts, extending far beyond literal verbal exchanges. They include nonverbal cues, symbolic gestures, rituals, cultural practices, scientific discourses, artistic expressions, and everyday interactions. Every game follows its unique set of rules and conventions, which can only be comprehended through active participation.[9]

Wittgenstein stressed the social dimension of language games. He argued that meaning is not something inherent in words or expressions themselves; instead, it emerges from their use within a social context. This context includes the historical, cultural, and societal norms and conventions that shape the rules of a language game.

For instance, scientific discourses can be seen as a type of language game with its distinct lexicon, methodologies, and standards of evidence. Similarly, religious practices form a language game with its unique rituals, symbols, and doctrines. Understanding these language games requires familiarity with their respective contexts and an active engagement in their practices.

Wittgenstein's concept of language games furthermore holds profound implications for understanding the realms of art and aesthetics. Artistic expressions can be perceived as a language game, with its distinct set of conventions, symbols, and norms. The meaning of an artwork emerges not merely from the artist's intent but also from its interaction with the viewers and the cultural context in which it is presented.[10] For instance, an abstract painting may elicit diverse interpretations from different viewers, each interpretation guided by the viewer's cultural background, personal experiences, and the social context in which they engage with the artwork. Here, understanding the artwork requires an active, participatory engagement, much like Wittgenstein's notion of

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[8] ibid; Jacob M Rump, 'The Phenomenological Dimension of the Theory of Meaning: A Critical Inquiry through Husserl and Wittgenstein', Emory University, vol. 1, no. 1, 2013.
[9] Wittgenstein (n 7).
[10] Anat Biletzki and Anat Matar, 'Ludwig Wittgenstein', Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2018.

playing a language game.

Everyday life, according to Wittgenstein, is a tapestry woven with myriad language games.[11] Simple acts such as greeting a neighbour, shopping at a local market, or reading a book are all instances of language games, each with its set of conventions, norms, and meanings. These everyday interactions shape our understanding of the world and infuse our lives with meaning.[12]

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and the concept of language games offer us a fresh lens to understand our experiences and our relationship with the world. From the most profound philosophical debates to the simplest daily activities, Wittgenstein urges us to see our experiences as language games, each with its unique set of rules, conventions, and meanings. This perspective invites us to actively participate in these games, to immerse ourselves in the dialogue of life.[13]

Kohak in his book *The Embers and the Stars*, advocates for an active, empathetic engagement with the natural world, akin to participating in a language game. Both philosophers underscore the importance of experiential understanding. For Wittgenstein, to understand a language game, one must actively engage in it, and for Kohak, a profound understanding of nature comes from direct, embodied experience. This shared emphasis on active participation underlines a fundamental theme: meaning and understanding emerge from our dynamic interactions with the world, not from passive observation.[14]

TOWARD A NORMATIVE STANDPOINT ON A NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE: SYNTHESIZING WITTGENSTEIN'S LANGUAGE GAME AND KOHAK'S DIALOGUE WITH NATURE

Wittgenstein's concept of language games and Kohak's dialogue with nature, when viewed conjointly, paint a compelling picture of our relationship with nature – a picture that is rooted in active participation, experiential engagement, and reciprocal influence.

Wittgenstein's philosophy, centered around the concept of language games,

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[11] ibid; Wittgenstein (n 7).

[12] ibid.

[13] Biletzki and Matar (n 10).

[14] ibid; Kohák (n 2) 451.

postulates that the meaning of words and expressions is shaped by their use in specific social contexts.[15] This suggests a broader paradigm where our comprehension of the world is shaped by our active participation in diverse 'games' or contexts. These games could range from the scientific, religious, and artistic, to everyday mundane interactions, each with its unique set of rules and conventions.[16]

Kohak's dialogue with nature can be seen as a specific language game, one that involves not just observing nature but engaging with it in a dynamic, participatory manner. This dialogue is governed by its own set of rules and logic, which are shaped by the inherent laws of nature and the constraints of human perception.[17] The 'conversation' in this game is mediated not merely by explicit linguistic terms, but by a mutual shaping of existence, influenced by our interactions with the natural world.

What is interesting is the shared emphasis of Wittgenstein and Kohak on active participation and experiential engagement. For Wittgenstein, understanding a language game involves immersing oneself in it. Similarly, Kohak argues that an authentic understanding of nature requires a participatory dialogue. In both cases, understanding is not something static or given; it is dynamic, evolving from our active interaction with the world.[18]

Importantly, both thinkers underscore the need for context sensitivity. Wittgenstein highlights that language games are context-dependent, requiring an understanding of the specific cultural and societal norms that shape them. Similarly, Kohak's dialogue with nature demands an appreciation of nature in its own context, eschewing a strictly anthropocentric perspective.[19]

The parallels between Wittgenstein's language games and Kohak's dialogue with nature are not merely theoretical. Studies in environmental phenomenology and ecology provide empirical evidence that substantiates these connections. Environmental phenomenologists have shown how our direct sensory experiences with nature shape our understanding of it, mirroring the

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[15] Salwa (n 1).
[16] ibid.
[17] Kohák (n 2).
[18] Biletzki and Matar (n 10).
[19] Salwa (n 1).

transformative power of participation in a language game.[20] Meanwhile, ecological research has underscored the reciprocal influence between humans and nature, reminiscent of the dialogic interaction proposed by Kohak.[21]

The convergence of Wittgenstein's and Kohak's ideas suggests a normative standpoint for our relationship with nature. It invites us to approach nature not as passive observers but as active participants in a dialogue, a language game governed by the laws of nature and our interactions with it. This standpoint is not about mastery or domination of nature, but about reciprocal shaping, mutual respect, and co-existence. Such a standpoint could pave the way for a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with the natural world. It calls for a shift from an exploitative mindset to one of active engagement and mutual learning. It highlights the critical importance of understanding and respecting the 'rules' of the natural world – the ecological laws and constraints that shape our existence.

Drawing on the parallels between Kohak and Wittgenstein's ideas, it is thought-provoking to consider the concept of a language game in the context of our experience of nature. Viewing nature as a language game implies that our encounters with the natural world involve a continuous negotiation and creation of meanings. Just as language games are shaped by contextual factors and evolve through social interaction, our understanding, and engagement with nature are likewise shaped by our interactions, and the ecological context in which they occur.

Thus, synthesizing Wittgenstein's concept of language games with Kohak's dialogue with nature illuminates a normative standpoint on our relationship with nature – one that is rooted in active engagement, reciprocal influence, and respect for the context of nature. This standpoint offers a compelling framework for fostering a more sustainable and respectful relationship with the natural world. It ties Wittgenstein and Kohak closely together, demonstrating how their philosophies, though developed independently, converge in powerful ways to

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[20] Lara S Franco, Danielle F Shanahan and Richard A Fuller, 'A Review of the Benefits of Nature Experiences: More than Meets the Eye', International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, vol. 14, no. 1, 2017, pp. 864; Emilia Pramova and others, 'Sensing, Feeling, Thinking: Relating to Nature with the Body, Heart and Mind', People and Nature, vol. 4, no. 1, 2021, pp. 351.

[21] Dick Saarloos, Jae-Eun Kim and Harry Timmermans, 'The Built Environment and Health: Introducing Individual Space-Time Behavior', International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, vol. 6, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1724.

inform our understanding of and engagement with the natural world.

TOWARDS A NEW PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO NATURE

In conclusion, both philosophers, though operating in different domains, converge on several salient points, which when combined, elucidate a normative standpoint for our engagement with nature. Wittgenstein's philosophical inquiries, with a focus on language games, bring to the fore a crucial understanding that the meanings humans ascribe to words are not intrinsic but are shaped by their use in specific social contexts. His work broadens the scope of these language games to include a wide array of human activities, underscoring the necessity of active participation to grasp their meanings.[22] Kohak, on the other hand, directs our attention to nature, proposing a dialogue that involves a reciprocal, active engagement with the natural world. This dialogue can be seen as a unique language game, with its own set of rules, guided by the laws of nature and the limitations of human perception.[23]

Understanding the dialogue with nature, like any other language game, necessitates an appreciation of the specific context in which it occurs. It is not about fitting nature into a human-centric framework, but rather about understanding it in its own right, in its own context. The proposed exploration of our relationship with nature encourages us to view nature as a participant in a dynamic dialogue rather than as a passive object of observation. This stance foregrounds respect for nature's autonomy and the value of experiential engagement. It underlines the necessity of active participation in this 'dialogue with nature,' framed as a unique language game – one that can potentially broaden our understanding and foster a harmonious coexistence with the natural world. If we realize the effects of avoiding such a language game on our societal structures and relationships, a change is unavoidable. Only through a change of its approach towards nature can humanity aspire to cultivate a sustainable, respectful, and mutually beneficial relationship with the natural world.

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[22]Biletzki and Matar (n 10.)

[23] Kohák (n 2).

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