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Eros After Nature

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Abstract: On ground shared by environmental hermeneutics, critical social theory, and environmentally minded feminism, this article attempts to conciliate between the nearly antithetical ethical viewpoints of environmental philosophers David Abram and Steven Vogel. It will demonstrate first that Abram’s linguistic arguments for extending ethical considerability to nonhuman nature succumb to two of Vogel’s debilitating critiques, which it labels *the social constructivist critique* and *the discourse ethics critique*, and secondly that Abram fails to guard against *the problem of human-human oppression*. The article also points out, on the other hand, that while Vogel evades the problem of human-human oppression, his view fails to protect against *the problem of dangerous anthropocentrism*. Operating within the boundaries that Vogel establishes, it will seek to avoid the pitfalls of Abram’s view, to address the underlying ideology that leads to both types of oppression, and to eliminate the problem of dangerous anthropocentrism. To do so it draws upon the arguments of Trish Glazebrook, contending that Abram’s appeals to the “speech” of nature can be more effectively conceptualized as erotic appeals, and that engaging in this call-and-response eros promotes the development of virtues that undermine our current ideology and extend to both the human and the nonhuman.

Keywords: environmental ethics, social constructivism, discourse ethics, ecophenomenology, ecofeminism

In their introduction to *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics*, Clingerman, Treanor, Drenthen, and Utsler note that in response to the largely essentialist first wave in environmental philosophy, which sought to define and categorize entities such as “nature” and “wilderness,” a second wave arose, advancing either social constructivist or phenomenological notions of nature (Clingerman et al. 2014, 5). Interacting with arguments advanced by philosophers from both camps of this latter generation, I seek to establish a middle ground that relies primarily on the insights of the social constructivist, but without dismissing wholesale the insights of the environmental phenomenologist.

I take Steven Vogel to be the strongest proponent of the first group of the second wave, though his arguments have not yet received the recognition that they deserve. Vogel creatively and winsomely advances constructivist critiques of phenomenological appeals to nonhuman nature as grounds for ethical considerability, and in their stead he presents an alternative paradigm for thinking about the relation between humans and their environments. W. S. K. Cameron provides an apt introduction:

> In a series of astute papers over the last fifteen years, Steven Vogel has developed a remarkably compelling social constructivist critique of "nature." Having drawn on several well-known and widely accepted postmodern worries, he might have appeared vulnerable to the traditional environmentalist's equally well-known counterthrust: doesn't the reduction of nature to culture simply efface nature in one last, hubristic and utterly anthropocentric gesture? Yet Vogel's argument is carefully constructed, the fruit of a thoughtful and sober mind. He carefully avoids the overstatement to which some have been prone. (Cameron 2014, 102)

Additionally, he supplies a likely explanation for the lack of response to these arguments: "I suspect the silence of embarrassment in the face of Vogel's stunningly counterintuitive conclusion" (Cameron 2014, 102). Focusing on the interchange between Steven Vogel and David Abram, the latter of whom champions the "traditional environmentalist's equally well-known counter-thrust" to the arguments of the social constructivist, I seek to establish a central place for nonhuman animals and their environments in a post-natural environmental philosophy.

Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous* is a clarion call to experience the wonder or "magic" that he himself experienced while living with those whose lives are inseparably intertwined with their environments. As a sleight-of-hand magician, he had begun to explore the therapeutic value of magic before embarking upon the project that changed the course of his career:

> I was to journey to rural Asia not outwardly as an anthropologist or academic researcher, but as a magician in my own right, in hopes of gaining a more direct access to the local sorcerers. I had been a professional sleight-of-hand magician for five years back in the United States, helping to put myself through college by performing in clubs and restaurants throughout New England. I had, as well, taken a year off from my studies in the psychology of perception to travel as a street magician throughout Europe and, toward the end of that journey, had spent some months in London, England, exploring the use of sleight-of-hand magic in psychotherapy, as a means of engendering communication with distressed individuals largely unapproachable by clinical healers. (Abram 1997, 4-5)

A desire to engender healing manifests itself in Abram's work. His arguments abound with appeals to the ways in which peoples who are more in touch with the "more than human" world experience magic, thoroughly therapeutic, that has been lost upon those who have lost touch with the world that exists outside the city walls.

In response to the arguments of Abram and another environmental phenomenologist, Scott Friskics—both of whom defend the view that nature "speaks" in a manner that merits ethical considerability—Vogel (2006, 2002) delivers in his "Silence of Nature" an argument that I take to be nearly irrefutable when coupled with concerns raised in his "Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature," published four years prior. Vogel argues that claims to speak for nature are social by virtue of the communal nature of language and, therefore political. Claims to speak for anything that cannot clarify for itself what it aims to communicate, via the dialogical medium of language, are thus intrinsically and unavoidably problematic. Appeals to nature are subject to the interpretive biases of those who claim to "speak" on its behalf, and such appeals are used to justify and perpetuate violence and oppression toward human beings.

On this basis, Vogel concludes that appeals to nature must be abandoned. Instead, he proposes that we evaluate competing claims on the basis of our practices themselves. Thus, "The question for environmental theory isn't 'what does nature require?' but rather 'what sort of environment ought there to be?' or more to the point 'what practices ought we to engage in?'" (Vogel 2002, 36). Indeed, he argues, "The critical force of such a theory lies in pointing out that today that question is never asked, and certainly is never democratically answered, and that as a result the environment we inhabit is the unplanned outcome of a whole series of private decisions that are made for private gain in a way that leaves it structurally impossible to take into account their public consequences" (Vogel 2002, 36-37). Our current ecological catastrophe has come about as a result of these private choices and their consequences, and Vogel advocates an ideological shift that will force us to acknowledge the con- sequences of our actions, then take the initiative to act differently.

Two problems arise in response to Vogel's argumentation, however. First, Abram's phenomenological accounts, which rely heavily upon examples from his own experiences as a researcher living in rural Asia and his interactions with nonhuman animals and their environments in general, do exhibit a *prima facie* plausibility. Considered holistically, his various accounts make a strong case that those of us who live in industrialized cultures have lost touch with a reciprocity experienced by those whose existences are inextricably intertwined with their environments—and it seems likely that individuals from multifarious socio-historical backgrounds, regardless of disposition, would acknowledge the verity of these accounts.

Second, Vogel's conclusion in "Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature," while preventing human-human oppression in the strongest possible way, does not go far enough to protect against human-nonhuman oppression. He attempts to meet this challenge by contending that his notion of *construction*, in contradistinction to the notion generally associated with social constructivism, is to be taken to refer to the fact that we actually, physically transform the environments we inhabit; he contends on this basis that once we recognize that our world is "the product of our own practices," and there- fore that "the environment is our responsibility," we *might* be prone to care for it. Consider his conclusion: "Far from leading us to a dangerous anthropocentrism, such a recognition…might lead us to a deeper kind of care, based on an appreciation of the profound responsibility we face" (Vogel 2002, 37-38). Based on our track record, however, this suggestion is far from assuring.

I initiate a middle ground between Abram and Vogel. Granting the verity of Vogel's conclusions in "Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature" and "The Silence of Nature," I reconceptualize and slightly modify the thrust of Abram's appeals to the "speech" of nature in a way that adheres to the framework that Vogel establishes and that upholds the integrity of Abram's phenomenological approach. In my first section I point to places where Abram's responses to the criticisms of the social constructivist and the discourse ethicist fall short, and I establish two additional problems that will be integral to my later argumentation. In my second section I draw upon Trish Glazebrook's vision of an erotic of nature in order to reframe Abram's argumentative strategy. In my third and final section I address two potential objections to my account, further developing my position in response.

Succinctly stated, my contention is as follows: the objectification-and-gratification-based ideology that underlies our cultural conceptions of *nature* and *eros* must be rooted out and replaced with an account that leads to more virtuous dispositions. The call-and-response eros that ensues when human individuals begin to actively and respectively engage with nonhuman animals and their environments enables the type of disposition needed to counteract our propensity to perpetuate both human-human and human-nonhuman oppression.

I. Two Problems and Two Critiques

In "Reciprocity," David Abram (2004) addresses two potential criticisms of his view that emerge from the general tradition to which Vogel belongs, and which are integral to Vogel's later criticisms of his view. In this first section I assess these arguments, introducing and defining two problems and two critiques: the problem of dangerous anthropocentrism, the problem of human-human oppression, the social constructivism critique, and the discourse ethics critique. After establishing the general context in which Abram raises these two critiques, which challenge his own view, I consider the arguments he gives in response, arguing that his position does not withstand the scrutiny of these debilitating criticisms.

Abram frames his argument with a captivating account of an encounter with wild, spawning salmon. In his first section, "The Lessons of Salmon," he argues that salmon have many things to teach us: they inspire a disposition of wonder and humility, they "instruct us about the primordial primacy of *place*," and most importantly, they teach us "the power and magic of reciprocity" (Abram 2004, 80-81). In contradistinction to Vogel's anthropocentric discourse ethics, Abram posits an ethics founded upon the reciprocal relation between the human and the nonhuman. He claims that reciprocity is "the foundation of any real ethic," and cites his version of the golden rule: "give unto others as you would have them give unto you" (Abram 2004, 81). His golden rule occasions two observations.

First, "other," for Abram, refers not merely to human others, but also—and perhaps primarily so—to nonhuman others, those animate flora and fauna encompassed within his oft-used phrase "the living land." Second, his emphasis is not on doing unto others, but on giving back to them: "If you wish to receive sustenance from the land, then you must offer sustenance to the land in return. If you wish to draw nourishment from the waters and the winds, then you must honor and shelter those waters and the winds. Most specifically: never take more from the living land than you need, and, indeed, never take more from the living land than you return to the land" (Abram 2004, 81). He advocates an ethics of reciprocity, bidding us to conceive of the living land and its animate inhabitants as worthy of ethical consideration and egalitarian interaction.

For Abram, "the wild teaching of reciprocity" has been lost upon citizens of the Global West, the vast majority of whom no longer live in harmony with the land they populate (Abram 2004, 82). Much of the problem, he argues in his second section, is our mechanistic conception of nonhuman nature. We define ourselves with reference to our "opposition" to the deterministic, externalized world that we inhabit. He traces this polarity from Socrates, who tells Phaedrus that the animals and trees have nothing to teach him, to Descartes, who reifies the human-animal, internal-external, material-immaterial dichotomies. Since the dawn of Western civilization, "city walls" have separated the human animal from the living land—and without common ground on which to meet, the "naturally" grounded ethics of reciprocity has been ignored by generations upon generations of human transgressors.

The Problem of Dangerous Anthropocentrism

Abram begins to probe for solutions to the problem that he has raised: should we "breach the wall" in the direction of the biocentrist or the anthropocentrist? He defines constructivism in a manner that helps to disclose Vogel's position: "Many deconstructive analyses claim that our experience of other-than-human phenomena is so thoroughly structured by our particular culture—that 'nature,' itself, may be said to be a cultural construction" (Abram 2004, 83). Vogel moves slightly beyond this characterization in claiming that by *construction* he refers to the literal ways in which we construct our environments, not merely to our cognitive constructions.

Abram immediately raises a general problem, which he deems "the most spurious of all modern presumptions" in "post-modern guise." We will call this problem *the problem of dangerous anthropocentrism*, which posits that claims to human exclusivity—here, with respect to what Heidegger called *weltbildend*, the human capacity to form or construct the world—inevitably lead the human animal to dominate and oppress the living land.

In response to the problem of dangerous anthropocentrism, raised against constructivism in general, Abram proposes a shift in ideology. He writes, "Human culture is itself structured and informed, in countless ways, by the wider-than-human matrix of powers in which it is embedded" (Abram 2004, 83-84). His contention is that we would do well to acknowledge, in addition to our recognition that nature is socially constructed, that the living land constructs the social atmosphere that informs our own constructions.

Here, Vogel's emphasis on the literal nature of human construction works in Abram's favor. The keystone of Abram's response to the problem of dangerous anthropocentrism is an argument that the inhabitants of the living land *also* physically construct their environments, and, furthermore, that they have fundamentally shaped our own environments. It is worth quoting Abram at length on this point:

> By acknowledging the direct, material influence of these non-human agencies, we do not pin human reality to a static or determinate order of essences. For by affirming the canyons, the wind, the moon, and the forest as actors, as animate agents like ourselves, we simultaneously acknowledge their formative influence and their otherness—their wild indeterminacy, their existence not as fathomable objects, but as inscrutable entities with whom we stand in a living relation. *Of course* the world we experience is not an objective and determinate reality—there is no doubt that it is a social creation! But the "society" that constructs this indeterminate world is much vaster than any merely human society—it includes spiders and swallows and subterranean seepages along with us two-leggeds. Surely it is time to outgrow this most tenacious of modernist presumptions: for all our

> craftiness and creative ferment, we humans are by no means the sole, or even the primary agents of the world's construction! (Abram 2004, 84)

It is on the basis of this agency-based reconceptualization of the external world that we can conceive of the living land *giving* to us, establishing grounds for an ethic of reciprocity.

Note the *prima facie* appeal of this position: it seems undeniably true that the spider acts upon and shapes her environment, as does the swallow. Even the canyon, the wind, the moon, and the subterranean seepage seem to be animate, world-shaping entities. On the basis of these points, a plea for mediation seems most plausible: Can't we have it both ways? Why not acknowledge the animation of nonhuman animals and their environments, which *obviously* do construct our shared world, while at the same time adhering to Vogel's modified constructivism?

The Social Constructivism Critique

The difficulty develops when we inquire into whether this commonality, this literal construction, is strong enough to merit ethical considerability. In response to the question of considerability, Vogel raises what we will call *the social constructivism critique*. To glean from and apply Vogel's argumentation: the issue with Abram's position is not its appeal to an "agency" of nonhuman nature; the issue is rather that attempts to *justify* this ethical theory fall victim to the naturalistic fallacy—and not necessarily to the is/ought, Humean formulation of this fallacy, but rather to the Habermasian, hermeneutic formulation. Nature is "always already ethically interpreted" and therefore "can't itself be used to arbitrate between ethical interpretations" (Vogel 2002, 34).

This is the point that thoroughgoing constructivism thrusts into Abram's ethic of reciprocity: we simply cannot appeal to nature in order to justify *any* ethical theory or other.[1] Vogel explains, "When appeals are made to 'what nature requires' or assertions of knowledge made regarding nature's true 'essence' or 'telos,' all that happens—all that *can* happen—is that particular socially mediated conceptions get projected onto a supposedly pre-social world and then illegitimately claimed to have been grounded there" (Vogel 2002, 34-35). Despite the seeming obviousness of the fact that the various inhabitants of the living land construct their environments, as we do, and despite the fact that these agencies have played and continue to play a part in shaping our own world(s), attempts to justify any theory via phenomenological intuitions succumb to the social constructivism critique.

The constructivist maintains that our very intuitions are subject to the biases of the cultures that have shaped us, and thus even the clearest, most obvious intuitions are founded upon appeals to nature, insofar as we—and we must—provide examples from nature to prompt these intuitions. To provide stronger, more obvious examples of nonhuman construction as a basis on which to justify ethical considerability, therefore, is to fail to heed the extent of the skepticism driving this critique: "When we say that such and such a policy is right because that's obviously what nature requires, we forget that the 'obviousness' with which nature appears to speak to us is itself socially and historically mediated, and hence not quite so obvious after all" (Vogel 2002, 30). In this light, even the comprehensive ideological shift that Abram ultimately proposes cannot counter this assault.

Abram's solution is a twofold proposal. First, he proposes that we conceive of "the rest of nature" as "something that can reciprocate us," an ideal that depends on our recognition that the "crowd of living subjects" is comprised of "active animal agencies." Second, in the spirit of egality, he proposes that our understanding of ourselves must change. Reciprocity is possible "only if we humans are recognized not as disembodied minds but as material, bodily subjects, *as animals in our own right*" (Abram 2004, 84). Such changes in ideology may certainly be beneficial, but their justification must ultimately be founded upon appeals to nature, as Abram's own next section makes clear. As it stands, then, this twofold ideological shift is powerless before the arguments that Vogel develops concerning appeals to nature as grounds for human-human oppression.

In light of the nonpossibility of appeals to nature, the desire to combat the problem of dangerous anthropocentrism leads us to consider Abram's response to a second variety of counterarguments: attempts to undermine his view that nature's "speech" is an adequate foundation for ethical considerability. Abram opens his essay's third section, "The Many-Voiced Earth," with an immediately relevant question: "But what role *does* language play in the practice of reciprocity?" (Abram 2004, 85). He proceeds to argue that people of indigenous cultures "hold a much more expansive view of language," which encompasses levels of communication ranging from bodily expressions to verbal language. "From an indigenous perspective," he writes, "everything speaks" (Abram 2004, 85). His point is that we would do well to learn that we are not the only beings who speak, and that such recognition is essential to an environmental ethics of reciprocity.

The Problem of Human-Human Oppression

Having considered the social constructivism critique at length, a primary objection to Abram's linguistic appeal should be somewhat apparent. Vogel's concern with Abram's position and others like it is that no matter how obvious the "speech" of nature might seem to be, interpretations are always subject to the interpretive biases and aims of the individual or group of individuals claiming to speak on nature's behalf.

Nature cannot clarify via discourse—which, Vogel argues, is essential to *language*—what it aims to communicate, and thus claims to speak on behalf of nature are prone to perpetuate what we will call *the problem of human-human oppression*: that humans often desire, whether consciously or subconsciously, to enact and then justify oppression toward other human beings, and that appeals to nature can be and often are employed to these ends. Vogel argues that attempts to ground ethics in the communicative acts of nature exhibit "a false patina of authority," and that "the naturalistic fallacy is above all a political danger, as any group whose social position of inferiority has been claimed to be based on nature…ought to recognize. Appeals to nature are profoundly dangerous for this reason, and a progressive environmental theory ought resolutely to eschew them" (Vogel 2002, 35).

The Discourse Ethics Critique

In "The Silence of Nature," Vogel specifically addresses and further undermines language-based arguments for extending ethical considerability to nonhuman animals and their environments. He advances what we will call *the discourse ethics critique*, which maintains, over-against weak conceptions of language like the conception that characterizes Abram's view, that only a more robust, dialogical understanding of language can successfully protect against the problem of human-human oppression.

Habermasian discourse ethics advocates such a conception, evading the problem of human-human oppression by virtue of the fact that its foundation is the communal, truth-seeking medium that is human language. Vogel clarifies further, arguing that the structure of language itself begets ethical obligation: "To speak with an other is thus to recognize that other as an equal, in a way that already points toward an ethical principle of universalization. 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" (Vogel 2006, 147). Rather than attempting to ground a normative account in the speech of an entity that cannot clarify, via linguistic discourse, what it intends to communicate, discourse ethics has its foundation in linguistic, reciprocal, truth-seeking discourse.

Abram's ethics of reciprocity succumbs first to the social constructionism critique, which maintains that attempts to justify any theory founded upon appeals to nature fall victim to the hermeneutic formulation of the naturalistic fallacy. It also succumbs to the discourse ethics critique, which maintains that only a robust, dialogical conception of language can successfully protect against the problem of human-human oppression—the principal problem that Abram's view invites and fails to protect against.

Vogel's view evades, of course, the two critiques raised against Abram. However, his view fails to protect against the problem of dangerous anthropocentrism, which maintains that claims to human exclusivity inevitably lead the human animal to dominate and oppress the living land. In mediating between Abram and Vogel, we must address this failure without reinstating the problem of human-human oppression.

II. Eros and the Nonhuman

What we need is a view that can successfully avoid both problems and both critiques. Such a position will operate within the parameters established by Vogel's view, thus evading the problem of human-human oppression, and make provisions to guard against the problem of dangerous anthropocentrism. In the section to follow I bring Trish Glazebrook's vision of an erotic of nature to bear on David Abram's phenomenological argumentation, advancing my thesis that reconceptualizing Abram's linguistic appeals as erotic appeals will allow us to avoid the problem of dangerous anthropocentrism while adhering to the framework that Vogel's view establishes.

Before introducing Glazebrook's arguments, however, it is necessary to discuss in greater detail Vogel's ultimate proposal and the problem to which it leads. Building on the foundation that Bill McKibben had established in *The End of Nature*, Vogel advocates that we abolish *nature* from environmental philosophy. The term is the basis for many problematic appeals and is replete with the baggage of nostalgia. Theories that invoke the term almost always bid us to return to a nature untouched by human hands, but, as McKibben argues, there is no untouched "nature" to return to. Furthermore, the desire to escape from civilization is more often than not an evasion of our responsibilities to care for our current environments (McKibben 1989). To this end, Vogel argues that we must begin by recognizing, communally, that we do socially construct the environments we inhabit, and that the transformative practices that we employ have environmental and political meanings and consequences (Vogel 2002, 36).

Vogel inaugurates a post-natural environmental philosophy, calling for a communal recognition that "the world we inhabit, for better or worse, is a world that is the product of our own practices," and that "the environment is our responsibility, in both the causal and moral senses of that word" (Vogel 2002, 36). For Vogel, our practices themselves are the only basis upon which to ground any normative ethical theory, and thus the question to ask in post-natural environmental philosophy is ultimately "What practices ought we to engage in?" The current socially structured system leads us to conclude that the *de facto* consequences of our actions are the results of "anonymous and anarchic forces such as those associated with free markets," but Vogel argues that post-natural environmental philosophy will endeavor to initiate fundamental changes to this system, such that we begin to recognize and take responsibility for these consequences (Vogel 2002, 38).

These are excellent insights, and Vogel is undoubtedly correct in arguing that changes must be made, especially in light of the quickly advancing catastrophe we face if we do not systematically take responsibility for our actions. These solutions, however, do not advance far enough in their attempt to undermine the ideologies that have given rise to our current state of affairs.

Vogel's argumentation concerning human practices as a standard of normativity invites the problem of dangerous anthropocentrism and makes no provision to guard against it. He believes that once changes are instituted such that the consequences of our actions become more apparent to us, we will be inclined to take responsibility to care for the environments we inhabit. This proposal is somewhat convincing—but many, many citizens care little about nonhuman animals and their environments, still regarding nonhuman inhabitants of our world as materials to be manipulated toward our ends.

His hope that we might take responsibility when faced with the consequences of our actions does not address the logics of domination that give rise to human-human domination *and* human-nonhuman domination in the first place. A post-natural environmental philosophy desiring to protect against the problem of human-human oppression must therefore dig deeper and address the problem of dangerous anthropocentrism. To guard against the former but not the latter is to fail to root out and replace the (constructed) ideologies that shape our very desires and intentions.

Trish Glazebrook does address and expose the ideological roots of our tendency toward oppression. She begins "Eco-logic: An Erotic of Nature," with a question: What would it mean to love nature? Questions concerning *eros* and *phusis* are the primary concern of her inquiry, and she argues that an erotic of nature requires at least two actions of us: first, that we recognize that we are already in nature, and second, that we resist those logics of domination that perpetuate reductionistic conceptions of *eros* and *phusis*.

Regarding the former, Glazebrook stands in complete agreement with Vogel. We are always already operating within the animate world of "nature." In fact, this is a point that Abram, Vogel, and Glazebrook all agree upon. Each desires to undercut the hubristic propensities that arise from our tendency to ignore (or overcome) our own animality. However, where Abram sees civilization and nature as opposite ends of a single spectrum, Vogel and Glazebrook seek to discard this dichotomy: "If culture is not opposed to nature, then the human relation to nature need not be one of opposition and domination" (Glazebrook 2004, 97). Vogel pushes this contention to its logical end, calling for us to abandon the term "nature" altogether—but even without this stipulation, any view that eliminates the nature-culture polarity is one step closer to the goal of destabilizing the logic of domination and oppression that has contaminated our views of *phusis* and *eros*.

It is clear that Glazebrook shares Vogel's desire to counter the problem of human-human oppression. Her vision of an erotic of nature moves a step further, however, with the second action that it requires of us. Resistance to those logics of domination that perpetuate reductionistic conceptions of *eros* and *phusis* invites the inauguration of new, more virtuous constructions.

The social constructivism critique and the discourse ethics critique undermine Abram's linguistic arguments for extending ethical considerability to the living land, but Abram's accounts nevertheless exhibit a plausibility that merits our further consideration. Furthermore, the attitude that permeates his work is shot through with virtuosity—an attitude that may extend to the human, as Vogel seeks to emphasize, and the nonhuman, which is Abram's principal concern. Glazebrook sets the *reductive* logics of domination that dominate our cultural ideology over-against an ecology based in *love*: "Eco-logic is instead *seductive*. It is an erotic, an invitation to love" (Glazebrook 2004, 97). I propose that Abram's linguistic appeals are better conceptualized as *erotic* appeals, as sensual solicitations that draw us to respond erotically—with love.

This proclamation comes at the beginning of her essay, and Glazebrook does not develop this idea of seduction. By recasting Abram's account according to a call-and-response *eros*, I seek to further develop it; on my account, the "magic" that Abram experiences in nonhuman nature operates not according to a speech-response paradigm, but rather to an arousal-response paradigm.

The awkwardness of my proposition to eroticize Abram's account arises on account of our current cultural conception of the erotic—which leads us to address our current ideology. Glazebrook argues that a single ideological orientation links our conception of the erotic to our conception of nonhuman nature: both are based upon the manipulation of an other for the sake of one's own gratification. In both cases, via objectification, the inwardness of the other in question is systematically denied or ignored. In the case of *eros*, our cultural expressions of pornography, along with our prostitution industry and the frequency of rape-occurrences, belie what she pinpoints as a "male erotic," a particular conception that has violence, domination, and submission at its core.

The very essence of pornography excludes acknowledging the inwardness of the other in question. Glazebrook writes, "Pornography is a spectative erotic that caresses the other unfeelingly in a gaze. Especially superficial, since the seer and the seen are widely separated, contemporary pornography does not offer a variety of visions of the erotic, but a repetitive paradigm of domination and submission" (Glazebrook 2004, 103). Of prostitution, she writes, "Contemporary erotics uses the body of the other for pleasure. Evidence: the prostitution industry." Finally, she concludes that rape is "paradigmatic of contemporary American cultural expressions of love" (Glazebrook 2004, 103).

Compare this model with contemporary conceptions of *phusis*, of nonhuman flora and fauna, and the underlying ideology becomes apparent: "In contemporary techno-logics of domination, nature can be entered and exited at will: that is to say, the logic of consumption is inductive, and deductive. Nature is material for the reproduction of commodities, or itself commodified and stored in parts and conservation areas, and visited at will" (Glazebrook 2004, 97). Thus the ideology of objectification and gratification that manifests in our culture via pornography, the prostitution industry, and cases of rape, also manifests in our transgressions against the nonhuman inhabitants of our world and their particular environments.

Addressing the problem of human-human oppression by proposing a more robust view of language, Vogel's approach, is an excellent step toward progress. But it does not yet address the objectification-and-gratification-based ideology that denigrates our conceptions of *eros* and *phusis*. This ideology must be addressed, rooted out and replaced; doing so will initiate significant progress in addressing the problem of dangerous anthropocentrism, in addition to addressing the problem of human-human oppression. An erotic of nature replaces the current ideology with a paradigm characterized by "respectful intimacy and holistic appreciation"—virtues that extend to the human *and* the nonhuman (Glazebrook 2004, 95).

Respectful intimacy and holistic appreciation are perhaps the two virtues that best describe Abram's approach. While living amidst the shamans of the indigenized peoples of Bali, Indonesia, Abram came to realize that the knack for healing and the heightened consciousness that the shamans possess are based not in supernatural powers or drug-induced hallucinations, but in their posture of respect and receptivity toward the "more-than-human" landscape. Again, it behooves us to quote Abram at length:

> Yet in tribal cultures that which we call "magic" takes its meaning from the fact that humans, in an indigenous and oral context, experience their own consciousness as simply one form of awareness among many others. The traditional magician cultivates an ability to shift out of his or her common state of consciousness precisely in order to make contact with the other organic forms of sensitivity and awareness with which human existence is entwined. Only by temporarily shedding the accepted perceptual logic of his culture can the sorcerer hope to enter into relation with other species on their own terms; only by altering the common organization of his senses will he be able to enter into a rapport with the multiple nonhuman sensibilities that animate the local landscape. It is this, we might say, that defines a shaman: the ability to readily slip out of the perceptual boundaries that demarcate his or her particular culture—boundaries reinforced by social customs, taboos, and most importantly, the common speech or language—in order to make contact with, and learn from, the other powers in the land. His magic is precisely this heightened receptivity to the meaningful solicitations—songs, cries, gestures—of the larger, more-than-human field. (Abram 1997, 9)

The shaman's magic derives from her respectful disposition, insofar as she approaches other modalities of being on their own terms and in a posture of hermeneutical humility. The magic that Abram has experienced via his connections to nonhuman animals and their environments, and which his phenomenological accounts aim to communicate, only arises on the basis of this initiative posture. The virtue of the one who seeks determines, at least in part, the response of the beings being sought.

Ideally, those who seek love receive love in return. Those who approach the living land with a respectful desire for intimacy are met, if Abram's account is correct, with appeals that lead to further appreciation and a desire for increased intimacy. At one point in his book, Abram tells of an experience wherein the interwoven webs of many spiders held him captive while he hid himself inside of a small cave, awaiting the end of a strong tempest. He writes of these spiders, "But they were my introduction to the spirits, to the magic afoot in the land. It was from them that I first learned of the intelligence that lurks in nonhuman nature, the ability that an alien form of sentience has to echo one's own, to instill a reverberation in oneself that temporarily shatters habitual ways of seeing and feeling" (Abram 1997, 19). The spellbinding intelligence that Abram here stumbles upon, an encounter contingent upon his disposition to careful observation and respectful reception, captivates him in the manner that the beauty, wisdom, and kindness of a lover would captivate him. The encounter cultivates in him a desire for another interaction and for increased intimacy.

The "magic" that Abram bids us to experience is the seduction of the living land, or can be reconceptualized as such. Glazebrook defines an erotic of nature as "a respectful love of what presents itself to the senses," and this is the erotic that presents itself in Abram's phenomenological accounts.

III. Toward an Erotic, Post-Natural Environmental Philosophy

A first objection arises, at this point: I have briefly mentioned that the call-and-response erotic requires us to recognize and appreciate the inwardness of an other, the particular nonhuman animal and the particulars of her environment. In order to remain within the parameters established by Vogel's account, however, aren't we obligated *not* to extend inwardness to nonhuman subjects? To do so would be to project human values onto the nonhuman, thereby inviting, once again, the problem of human-human oppression.

I begin my response by noting a trope that appears in all three of the accounts in question: Abram, Vogel, and Glazebrook each present a different perspective on the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues. Abram and Vogel frame their discussions in light of the moment wherein Socrates tells Phaedrus that he has nothing to learn from the animals or the trees—and whereas Abram argues that Socrates's perspective attests to and reifies Western disdain for materiality, Vogel argues that this remark, coupled with Socrates's discursive argumentative strategy, demonstrates the infinite wealth of our capacity for language. Socrates does not "listen" to nature because he cannot ask it to clarify what it desires to communicate in order to arrive at the truth (Abram 1997, 115-19; 2004, 87; Vogel 2006, 155-56).

Vogel does not do justice to Abram's criticisms, however. While he does address Abram's initial comments on the hubris behind Socrates's comment, he ignores the discussion that follows these comments. Just after the section from which Vogel quotes, Abram provides an insightful analysis of the *Phaedrus*, arguing that here Plato "brings philosophy itself outside the city, there to confront and come to terms with the older, oral ways of knowing which, although they may be banished from the city, nevertheless still dwell in the surrounding countryside" (Abram 1997, 117).[2] He maintains that in this, the only dialogue that takes place outside of the city, Plato questions and critiques "the practice of writing to which he is indissolubly tied," and allows himself to "fully acknowledge and offer respect to the oral, animistic universe that is on the wane" (Abram 1997, 118). Vogel fails to contend with the possibility, derived from the larger context of the dialogue, that in the *Phaedrus*, Plato pays homage to the diminishing relation of reciprocity between the human and the nonhuman.

Glazebrook's treatment of Plato's Socrates does not look to glean from or contend with the quote from the *Phaedrus*, but it does mirror Abram's account in two ways: it is characterized by careful attention to literary context, and it attempts to counteract a long-established interpretation. To ground her vision of an erotic of nature she turns to the roots of the Western philosophical tradition—specifically to Socrates's account of love in the *Symposium*. His speech follows that of Pausanias, who distinguishes between "a vulgar, base kind of physical love that knows no restraint of reason," and "a higher, intellectual love that transcends the body" (Glazebrook 2004, 99). Socrates is typically taken to agree with Pausanias's view, but Glazebrook argues that his account of love can and should be interpreted in an altogether different light.

Traditionally, Diotima's ladder has been interpreted to argue that we ought to begin by sensuously loving the body of another, and thence to ascend upward, toward the realm of the purely intellectual. At the fount of Western philosophy, such a vision provides the foundation for a view of materiality that leads to the logics of domination and oppression. Glazebrook's reading, on the other hand, seeks to counter this view by providing an alternative reading. Love, on her account, can be reconceptualized as a marriage of the material and the intellectual:

> In Diotima's account, one begins with the beauty of the body of another, and ends by giving birth to great ideas from one's own soul. This love is spectative in that its originary erotic moment is the spectacle of the body of the beloved. The transition is from a masculinized conception of love to a feminized one: at first one begets ideas in the body of another, as a man begets in a woman; but eventually one gives birth to ideas oneself, from one's own body, as a woman gives birth from herself. One gives birth to virtue in and from oneself by loving the other. Through the body and the soul of the other, one comes to discover what is in one's own soul. Hence Diotima's analysis is superficially homosexual and exclusionary of women, but can be taken to suggest much more deeply that wisdom is a kind of pregnancy for which cross-gender fertilization is necessary. (Glazebrook 2004, 101)

Whereas the traditional reading begins with and quickly leaves behind the body of the other, Glazebrook's reading bids us to move inward, beneath external beauty, to appreciate the other herself, in her inwardness. Rather than conceiving of the body as an occasion to be discarded after an intention has been carried out, we are to grow in intimacy and, simultaneously, to come to an appreciation of the other's internality, her unique modality of being. This other-based love gives birth to ideas—and to virtue.

The move that Glazebrook makes at this point, connecting *eros* to *phusis*, is to contend that we would do well to overthrow the modern, mechanistic view of nonhuman animals and their environments and to re-adopt an Aristotelian, teleological conception. Also at the fount of Western philosophy, Aristotle came to conceive of the natural world teleologically; Glazebrook argues in favor of readopting this view as a means to counteract our current ideology.[3]

At the end of her essay, Glazebrook briefly showcases Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as an exemplar of her vision of an erotic of nature—and as Glazebrook presents him, Goethe's disposition happens to mirror Abram's.[4] Goethe sought to undercut the hegemony of the modern, mechanistic conception of nature, and his "method was an ongoing attentiveness, in which he refused to abandon the object of study by abstracting to the theoretical" (Glazebrook 2004, 110). Harkening back to our earlier conclusion, the virtue of the one who seeks determines the response of the beings being sought, at least in part, and Goethe's respectful disposition exemplifies the type of virtuosity that permeates Abram's work.

In line with our contention that an approach that begins with holistic appreciation prompts the nonhuman other to sensually entreat us, inspiring in us a desire for increased intimacy, Glazebrook writes that Goethe "searched for meaning through prolonged empathetic looking that assumed a wholeness and harmony in nature" (Glazebrook 2004, 110). The "prolonged empathetic looking" is at first spectative, in that it begins by gazing upon the other, but it moves past immediate, aesthetic appeal in order to recognize the other's interiority, thereby giving birth to great ideas. The ends of the erotic of nature are *virtue*, formed "in and from oneself by loving the other," and greater self-knowledge. Goethe's example verifies these ends, as Glazebrook notes that "he held that sustained and close attention to nature changes the thinker" (Glazebrook 2004, 110). Combining these, I maintain that it changes the thinker in virtuous ways.

My response to the social constructivism-based objection that we have an obligation not to extend "inwardness" to nonhuman subjects, so as to protect against the problem of human-human oppression, is this: by recasting Abram's linguistic appeal as an erotic appeal, I have not replaced one appeal to nature with another. Abram appeals to nature but I appeal to *us*.

In agreement with Vogel's contention that we must look to our practices themselves as the sole basis upon which to ground a normative ethical theory, I have weakened Abram's appeal to the "speech" of nature, such that it cannot be conceptualized as grounds for ethical considerability. On my view, normativity rests not in the seductive entreaties of nature, which are indeed central to my argument, but rather in the *virtues that our solicitations of and responses to these sensuous entreaties help to develop in us*. In particular, the virtues to which I refer are those to which Glazebrook calls our attention: respectful intimacy, holistic appreciation, and, at their foundation, the virtue of love.[5]

The astute reader will remember, however, that Vogel attempts to diminish the possibility of appealing to teleological conceptions of *phusis*: "When appeals are made to 'what nature requires' or assertions of knowledge made regarding nature's true 'essence' or 'telos,' all that happens—all that *can* happen—is that particular socially mediated conceptions get projected onto a supposedly pre-social world and then illegitimately claimed to have been grounded there" (Vogel 2002, 34-35). As Abram points out, however, *all* conceptions are socially mediated—and if normativity can only be grounded in our practices themselves, we do well to replace socially mediated conceptions that lead to domination and oppression with conceptions that combat the problem of human-human oppression, as Vogel desires to do, and that also address and root out the cultural ideologies that lead to the perpetuation of domination and oppression in general, thereby further combatting the problem of dangerous anthropocentrism.

A second objection arises at this point, and I will conclude my argument in response: If all conceptions are socially constructed, aren't the virtues that a call-and-response erotic helps us develop also mere social constructions? My response is as follows: one of Vogel's two primary concerns with appeals to the "speech" of nature is that nonhuman animals and their environments cannot clarify what they aim to communicate. Dialogical language enables us to consult with other human beings, to call our perceptions into question, and to weed out untruths that arise on the basis of faulty perceptions. Vogel's other primary concern is that the false aura of authority that often accompanies these appeals is readily used to justify human-human oppression. But without further qualification, democratic discourse ethics does not provide certainty that the problem of human-human oppression will not arise; it assumes that the discursive community will come together and weed out instances of oppression when they crop up.

The only *certain* protection against human-human oppression that I can imagine is as follows: each human being must continuously will an other-based love that extends even to her enemies. Such a love would ensure that those who possess the power to oppress would not occasionally grow greedy and use it. This vision is clearly too optimistic to obtain in our present world, but if openness to love nonhuman animals and their environments promotes the development of virtues that extend to the human and the nonhuman, then we can and must lend our consideration to this possibility.

Notes

With sincere gratitude and admiration I acknowledge the influence of W. S. K. Cameron, who taught us to philosophize with courage, recognizing always the debt of love.

[1] Vogel addresses the particular type of "pre-human" appeal to nature's constructive capacities that Abram presents: "For much of environmental philosophy, nature functions as that which underlies and makes possible social and linguistic processes, and indeed as precisely what one appeals to when one wishes to justify normative assertions about those processes (which is to say, about how human beings ought to act). Such environmental philosophy is thus characterized by a deep naturalism that claims to find in pre-social nature the basis for ethical and political imperatives. But it is the very idea of such a naturalistic basis that practices of deconstruction call into question, teaching us to look for the unexpressed and unexamined assumptions that lie behind such claims. If nature and what nature requires are the terms to which one appeals to justify one's environmental views, then the question cannot be avoided as to how one comes to *know* nature and its requirements—and in the context of hermeneutic insights about the structure of understanding that question turns out to be a troubling one" (Vogel 2002, 30).

[2] W. S. K. Cameron develops this argument further (Cameron 2010).

[3] Brian Treanor has called to my attention that alternative conceptions of *phusis* are also available—*ktisis* is one such alternative (Foltz 2015). My additional thanks are owed to him for his comments, suggestions, and advice.

[4] Dalia Nassar addresses the possibility of looking to Goethe for an alternative scientific approach in greater detail. She also does so "after the end of nature" (Nassar 2014).

[5] W. S. K. Cameron has pointed out that my account of the relation between *eros* and virtue should be developed further. I plan to do so in a subsequent essay.

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