

Embracing the ineffable: Landscape art, Gesture and Environmental Ethics

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A poetic engagement with the landscape can take many forms. I use the term poetic in the broadest possible sense: be it verbal, visual or musical, landscape art, as I shall call it, is generally regarded as having a poetic dimension if it evokes or gestures towards something we cannot quite grasp or articulate. Evoking and gesturing are, generally speaking, the *raison d'être* of the poetic work of art. This is uncontentious if it is some facet of the human condition that is evoked or gestured towards, and while it is arguably the case that this has traditionally been the role of the poetic work of art, it is not quite so clear how landscape art might fulfill the same role. It is not quite so clear how landscape art, if it is genuinely poetic and therefore expressing far more than sentimental longings or apocalyptic fear, might engage with that which we cannot quite grasp in our relationship with the natural world. While it is widely recognised that this relationship is conflicted and in need of revivification or perhaps *redintegration* (restoring to wholeness), there would seem to be little recognition of the value of landscape art in helping to bring this about. There is at the same time a heightened awareness of the need to include the natural world in our sphere of moral concern, and in the task of articulating the principles for so doing, the discipline of environmental ethics is afforded the principal role. There is, then, a perceived disjunction between ethics and aesthetics. I make the case that this perception is in fact a misperception, having its basis in an impoverished understanding of ethics and of the role of landscape art, and that if we are ever to arrive at what we might come to recognise as an environmental ethic then landscape art will have an indispensable role in bringing this about. Gesturing, it turns out, is a substantial notion with substantial implications which has a key role to play in this endeavour.

Our human predicament is that we must relate ourselves to things unseen or inchoate or inarticulate. These are things which lie outside our experience, but only just; things we can intuit but which remain elusive to identification or articulation. They are things we can gesture towards, though only if we have the means of so doing, and art has traditionally been one such means. At the same time, there are things, perhaps also unclearly seen, that place a substantial claim upon us, things we cannot take lightly. Our inescapable human task is to try to understand our engagement with these things, and articulating these unclearly seen things has traditionally been the role of ethics. Both art and ethics, then, can be understood as dealing with things unclearly seen but which engage us nevertheless, each charting its own course towards a clearer engagement with that to which we find ourselves already beholden.

Art and ethics have traditionally been separate endeavours, each charting its own course. That it should be so seems almost axiomatic; we see the distinction, and regard it as a

disjunction. The fact that we (as heirs to the Western philosophical tradition) don't question this is unsurprising if we delve into its roots; there we find in Plato, who wrote of an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry (607b5-6), thus between the rational and the 'merely' aesthetic. He thereby invests some authority in the disjunction, to which we then remain beholden. By regarding ethics as a purely rational endeavour with no essential connection to art or poetry, we buy into Plato's disjunction, and by failing to appreciate that there is indeed an essential link between ethics and aesthetics, we are left with an impoverished view of both. By falling victim to this restrictive view, we miss the invitation to work towards a reintegration of our relationship with the natural world, which landscape art represents. I claim that landscape art, to the extent that it has a genuinely poetic dimension that engages the unseen facets of our relationship to the natural world, is an integral and indispensable part of environmental ethics.

Environmental ethics: seeking the view from nowhere.

It is not a new idea that there could be or should be an environmental ethic. Victor Hugo perceived the need, and put forward the possibility in 1867:

In the relations of man with the animals, with the flowers, with the objects of creation, there is a great ethic, scarcely perceived as yet, which will at length break forth into the light and which will be the corollary and complement to human ethics. (Hugo, cited in Passmore, 3)

The twentieth century's seminal proponent was Aldo Leopold: 'There is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it The land relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations' (203). Both Hugo and Leopold thus saw an environmental ethic as something which would in due course emerge. Leopold elaborates on Hugo, hinting that something more than strictly economic values are an essential part of what he called the 'land relation'.

The idea that the natural entity might have value in and of itself is also one that is not new; we see it in the writings of John Muir, for example, who in 1901 stated that rattlesnakes were 'good for themselves, and we need not begrudge them their share of life.' (Muir, cited in Nash 39). Muir's initial inspiration was a cluster of orchids in the Canadian 'wilderness' which may have 'lived, bloomed, and died unseen,' a possibility which for Muir did not detract in any way from their value. In other words, he considered them to have value which was independent of human interest, a value intrinsic to the entity itself. Muir led the way in articulating the idea of environmental value, and it is this which environmental ethicists have focused on, aiming to establish some basis for an ethical dimension to our relationship with the natural world.

We all 'value' the natural environment: valuing the environment is an integral and ineliminable part of our relationship with it. Most such valuing, though, is bound up with our material needs: as consumers of natural resources, it is inevitable that we are party to an instrumental or utilitarian valuing of the natural environment. A more desultory but similarly ineliminable facet of our relationship with the environment is the valuing,

which is bound up with our individual tastes and personal preferences. All are bound up with the way we perceive the environment, the way we relate to it and the way we make our way in it. None among them is even suggestive of a plausible basis for an environmental ethic; to the contrary, all would seem to be part of the problem. Seeking to lump all these together precisely as such, environmental ethicists have sought to contrast them with a more substantial notion of value that is essentially and uniquely environmental and to which we would be universally beholden. It is an endeavour based on the assumption that such a value might exist but has remained hitherto unseen and which needs to be brought to light or perhaps even spelled out. The assumption at work here is that there can be a new way of valuing the environment, and it is one that we ought to wholeheartedly embrace.

This assumption proves to be far from innocent. Implicit in it is the view that we might come to embrace a new way of valuing, or come to be claimed by, or beholden to some value which has hitherto gone unseen. The assumption is that we have hitherto failed to value the environment quite as we ought, or in what amounts to the same thing, that the broad spectrum of values that come into play in our routine engagement with the environment has hitherto been lacking in some way. Furthermore, the notion of value in question would of necessity stand independently of the tangled web of values which inevitably come into conflict with each other, thus independently of any personal preference, and would be the basis for these to be critically assessed. Such a value could not be nominated, either arbitrarily or by popular vote, and nor could it be voluntarily declined. As such, it would compel normatively, as indeed it must if it were to function as the basis for a genuinely normative ethic.

The value or way of valuing that is being assumed here is one that is independent of anyone's biased viewpoint, thus independent of the colouring by preference and prejudice which the latter inevitably entails. We all have our way of seeing things which are coloured by habit, be that habit individual, cultural or historical. What this means is that we all bring our values to our perception: seeing is always seeing-from, with the view informed or coloured by our values. The point of the whole enterprise of environmental ethics has been to overcome this bias and, ultimately, to allow us to overcome the anthropocentrism which is purportedly at the root of our ecological woes. What would be required to achieve this is a new way of seeing; the view we seek is, ultimately, what Thomas Nagel describes as the view from nowhere (8).

Anthropocentrism has been identified as a bias analogous to sexism and racism, and as such something we ought to overcome. But as Bernard Williams observes, this analogy is simply incorrect: the bias of the latter is to treat the privileged (white or male) perspective as ineliminable from ethical reflection, but to regard ethics as human-centred is no such bias, since the human perspective is indeed ineliminable from ethical reflection. 'Our arguments have to be grounded in a human point of view; they cannot be grounded in a point of view that is no-one's point of view at all' (119). Williams' point is that ethics can only begin from our human viewpoint; ethics must start from somewhere, and 'the only starting point left is ethical experience itself' (93).

Williams' insight challenges the assumption that there might be a universal and abstract environmental value; the possibility of a new way of valuing the environment which would be the means of overcoming our ordinary, everyday valuing, conflicted, compromised, preference- and prejudice-tinged as it is, would seem to have been called into question. The view from nowhere, it would seem, might be unattainable. And if that is the case then all we are left with is our biased, incomplete and fragmentary view, which, far from being the solution to our ecological predicament, would seem to be the cause. This prompts the question as to how we might arrive at an environmental ethic, and indeed whether such a thing is possible.

John Passmore, writing about the possibility of an environmental ethic in one of the seminal works on the subject, makes an observation that hints at a way out of this conundrum. He observes: 'A morality, [like] a religion, is not . . . the sort of thing one can simply conjure up. It can only grow out of existing attitudes of mind, as an extension or development of them' (111). An environmental ethic, therefore, would be something we might eventually grow into, though the question remains as to what form our journey towards it might take.

Passmore is suggesting that the first steps in our journey towards an environmental ethic are already there in our encounter with the natural entity: that such an ethic, should it be possible, must grow out of *existing* attitudes of mind. The requirement would appear to be that we should find the means to overcome the conflicts and dilemmas that inevitably arise in our everyday encounter with the natural environment from within the values that we bring to that encounter, and that this must somehow be independent of our biased and incomplete individual perspective while at the same time avoiding any expectation that we could or should distil out some abstract and rarefied notion of value that would stand in a class of its own. This requirement is not straightforward and we risk stumbling on these first precarious steps.

Charles Taylor offers us an insight that lights up the path that Passmore has directed us towards. He observes that the values that have the strongest claim upon us are also the most difficult to articulate. And they are also the values with which we most closely identify. This is the basis for his substantial point that 'selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes' (3). These are the values that are so intimately bound up with our sense of who we are that we cannot easily objectify them. These are the values where we cannot simply opt out: to be neutral or ambivalent about them would amount to being neutral or ambivalent about ourselves. They are the values involved in what Taylor calls strong evaluation. Strong evaluation comes into play in matters that we don't take lightly: in a sense, we are involuntarily wholehearted in these evaluations. Strong evaluation can be understood as forming one end of a spectrum with the relatively superficial evaluation of mere preference-taking forming the other end.

Taylor elaborates that the values involved in strong evaluation remain unarticulated and to some extent inchoate: strong evaluation apprehends fundamental values that can never be fully known or grasped, being values that are intimately bound up with our sense of

who we are. These values have a depth dimension, whereby they must always remain elusive to explication or complete articulation; they remain, to a degree, ineffable. Importantly though, this though does not stop us from situating and orientating ourselves in relation to these values, and indeed they are the evaluations that form the basis for our moral evaluations.

Taylor nicely shows up the absurdity of attempting to derive an ethic from an abstract and rarefied notion of value. Williams has shown us that ethics begins with ethical experience, and Taylor's thesis dovetails nicely: instead of trying to boil that experience down to distil out some particular value, we embrace the richness of it without attempting to describe it reductively or assuming that this should be possible. Thus, Taylor and Williams offer us considerable insight into the process of being ethical. But the question remains as to how we are to be *environmentally* ethical: how we might understand environmental values as being intimately bound up with our sense of who we are, and how we might comport ourselves ethically towards the natural entity in a way that integrates values that are inchoate and ineffable.

A middle path, the middle voice

If ethics begins with ethical experience then we need the means to engage that experience in a way that its richness is respected. We need to find in that experience something more than mere personal preference, something more than an individual and partial appreciation of the natural environment. Taylor has shown us that there is indeed a depth dimension to our experience, wherein we find the sources of our moral evaluations, those values most closely entwined with our sense of who we are. But for Taylor, these are the values that come into play in our ethical relationships with other people; these are the values that inform our dealings with each other. Taylor does not offer any suggestion of how, or indeed whether, environmental values might also be found amongst these deeper, more fundamental values. It is therefore a possibility we need to explore for ourselves.

Taylor's notion of strong evaluation involves values about which we find ourselves unable to be equivocal and which we find difficult to articulate. These are the values he has in mind in his substantial claim that selfhood and the good are inextricably intertwined. These he refers to as our constitutive goods: they are constitutive of who we are as agents for whom being moral is an imperative. Like all values, these inevitably come into conflict. It is here that genuine moral dilemmas arise, dilemmas that challenge not only our standing on this or that issue but also our very identity, touching upon values so intimately entwined with our sense of who we are that our own being is called into question. By thus being drawn to touch upon progressively more fundamental values, we touch upon values that become progressively more elusive to articulation, and it is inevitable that progressively more fundamental questions must arise.

An inquiry into our most fundamental values can proceed neither rationally nor reductively; reason is silent on values, and we must travel by a different route. But this does not mean that such an inquiry cannot proceed systematically: a systematic inquiry need not be a purely rational or reductive one. We do in fact have at our disposal a

method of systematic inquiry, though it is one that has been marginalised if not all but forgotten, even though the basis for it is found in the very foundations of the western philosophical tradition.

Inquiring into the foundations of the western philosophical tradition is generally taken to mean metaphysical inquiry, thus into purely abstract notions about the ultimate nature of things and their underlying principles and causes. That we should regard this as normal is a reflection of a metaphysical bias which, as we have seen, is something quite entrenched in our moral reasoning, being already well established when Plato was writing about a quarrel which was for him already ancient. It is precisely this bias which lies behind the assumption that there could be or should be some universal, abstract value that would be the basis for an environmental ethic, and the failure of the effort to derive such an ethic in this way is a clear indication of the need to attain to a broader view than our metaphysical blinkers will allow.

In order to grasp what an alternative to metaphysics might mean, we need to understand metaphysics as first philosophy, that is, as the study of being. The possibility of an alternative to metaphysics requires that there be an alternative facet to the study of being, or in other words, that there be a different way of engaging first-philosophical questions. Heidegger wrote of a 'remarkable doubling [which] appears precisely in the determination of the essence of "First Philosophy"' (*Kant* 5). For Heidegger, first philosophy has a dual characterisation, neither one being prior to the other, such that 'both determinations belong together as the leading problem of a 'first philosophy' of beings' (*Kant* 5). Heidegger is directing our attention to something already long forgotten when Plato was writing about an ancient quarrel.

Metaphysics is about assertions: it makes assertions about the underlying principles and causes of things. If we are to understand an alternative to this, then it would be unhelpful to assert that there are no such underlying principles and causes, because this in itself would be a metaphysical assertion. Logically, there can be only one alternative: the eschewal of *any* foundational assertions, or any such attempt to establish ultimate grounding or explanation. This minimalist, non-committal stance, vapid as it may seem, is in fact the basis for Heidegger's conception of phenomenology (*Basic Problems* 2-3). For Heidegger, phenomenology is a purely methodological conception: it 'does not characterise the what of the objects of philosophical research . . . but rather the *how* of that research' (*Being and Time* 50). The 'how' he has in mind is one that respects the first-philosophical distinction to which he draws our attention, his ultimate aim being to reawaken a long-forgotten mode of inquiry.

A minimalist and non-committal stance is by no means an impotent one: it does not in any way disqualify or disable our engagement with fundamental questions. Indeed, it leads us to the most fundamental question of all, which also turns out to be the most elusive: the question of being. That is Heidegger's famous *Seinsfrage*, a question so consummately general that there can be no direct means of approach. The lovely paradox which allows us to engage this most general of questions is that our means of so doing is via the most mundane, familiar things.

In stark contrast to the reductive and abstract world of metaphysics, Heidegger's phenomenology invites us back into the world of ordinary, everyday things. He aims to reveal the poetic origins of our everyday concepts because he believes we will find his elusive *Seinsfrage* enfolded therein. If we read him in the German we find nouns bleeding into verbs (*Sein und Zeit* passim); nouns become verbs in a playful use of the German language, poetic in the original German but utterly lost in English translation. What he seeks to draw out is not merely the germinal trace of the concepts we routinely deploy, but the raw, unfiltered appreciation of phenomena, prior to their becoming crusted over with concepts; as such, his project is not merely etymological, but philological. His exploratory use of the German language dissolves away the traditional dichotomy of subject and object; instead, we find in his writing a doing without a doer, a middle-voiced approach to the question of being. The later Heidegger said that only a god can save us but it is clear from the early Heidegger that our salvation must come from the poets.

It is clear that Heidegger held the poets in high regard: it was they who were on the front line, fighting to recover an elementary apprehension of phenomena, something prior to their reification by concepts and thus prior to any form of cultural or historical colour or bias. Herein lies the promise of meeting phenomena as if for the first time, thereby revivifying, at least momentarily, the elusive *Seinsfrage*. But we can extend these ideas beyond poetry in its traditional, verbal form. We can generalise Heidegger's thesis: the question of being becomes a live one for us not only in verbal language if we engage it poetically but in any form of expression which is able to touch upon the ineffable and inchoate, thus to slip between active and passive, subject and object, and to enable a middle-voiced engagement of that originary intertwining of the self and its deepest, most inarticulate values.

Gesture, the *Seinsfrage* and the middle-voice

Art has the capacity to revivify the *Seinsfrage* for us but it comes with no guarantee. Engaging with art may be necessary, but by no means is it sufficient; the *Seinsfrage* is notoriously elusive. Somewhere between actively pursuing this elusive quarry and passively waiting for it to emerge is a middle-voiced engagement with familiar things that enables something deeper to shine through. The key notion that unlocks this for us is gesture.

Gesture turns out to be an interesting notion, which dovetails nicely with that of the middle voice. It is noun and verb, active and passive, subject and object. Gesturing is something we can do or something that an artwork does. Gesture is something we can capture or something that an artwork captures. The classical gesture sketch of the human figure is the perfect example, being both the means of capture as well as the thing captured, something executed as well as captured by both artist and model, neatly straddling the line between noun and verb, active and passive, subject and object. Gesture straddles boundaries, but does not dissolve them: rather, it is prior, both whither and whence.

A good gesture sketch of the human figure captures something. Usually it is movement or mood, though it might be something more subtle, perhaps power or grace or some force or intention coming from within the model that shines through the pose. The same idea can be extended to any gesture sketch, be it of the human figure or not: it is not so much about the appearance of the thing but what it does, how its shape is an expression of what is occurring within it. This idea applies universally: everything has gesture. Even a brick has gesture.

Landscape has gesture, albeit more elusive than the gesture possessed by a brick or expressed by a life model; it is gesture which captures the particularity of place. We can make sense of this idea if we eschew any attempt to identify it as either subjective or objective, thus allowing the possibility that it is both executed and captured. Landscape art, be it visual or verbal, succeeds if it captures or executes something we cannot put a name to, and perhaps all the more if it leaves open the question of whether it is capturing or executing that has occurred.

Our part in this middle-voiced engagement of the *Seinsfrage* begins and ends with witnessing. It is important to note, however, that witnessing is not merely passive: we are not mere subjects passively observing a constellation of objects. Simply observing and recording, whether verbally or visually and however skillfully it is carried out, will not suffice. If we are to genuinely engage the *Seinsfrage* and to thereby capture or execute that unnamable something that slips between active and passive, subject and object, then we need the means to engage it in a way that preserves and respects its ineffability. Passive observation will clearly not suffice: if we are to genuinely engage the ineffable, then something is demanded of us. Witnessing has an active dimension.

Embracing the ineffable

The key to the active dimension of witnessing is to embrace the ineffable, thus to forgo any temptation to reduce it to something that can be conceptually grasped. This is the first step in approaching the middle voice of pure witnessing in which the intertwining of the self and its deepest, most inchoate values might come to the fore. Exploring this intertwining has classically been the role of art and literature, but landscape art, to the extent that it succeeds in embracing the ineffable, offers up a new possibility: that some kind of environmental value might also be among those with which the self is so closely conjoined and strongly enjoined that they cannot but function as moral sources. It is here that the broader relevance of our engagement with the ineffable becomes apparent: here we catch a glimpse of the reunification of ethics and aesthetics, the regaining of a prior unity by which both are empowered, in which an environmental ethic might appear on the horizon of their reunified path.

Returning to Leopold, we find a hint that he would concur:

Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language. The

quality of [the natural world] lies . . . in this higher gamut, as yet beyond the reach of words. (96)

Here in one passage we see Leopold, in his own poetic engagement with the natural world, charting a course that begins with our individual tastes and preferences and progresses through more substantial notions of environmental value before setting a bearing towards the ineffable.

An environmental ethic, for which Leopold led the way in articulating the need, is something that will in due course emerge, but not something we can willfully derive. We do, however, have a part to play in its unfolding, a part which we can now see more clearly. We play that part well if we open ourselves to the possibility and the promise of a middle-voiced engagement with the natural world and an ongoing engagement with the ineffable. Our middle-voiced engagement is legitimated and empowered by our understanding it fully, thus in the context of the philosophical tradition and the fundamental questions it has raised. While the most fundamental of all have traditionally been metaphysical questions, Heidegger has shown us that there is an alternative and that this, the *Seinsfrage*, is there in our everyday concepts and our everyday engagement with the most ordinary things. The forgetting of this most fundamental of questions is now well known, but perhaps we understand it better by returning to the German, in which its *Vergessenheit* gives us the sense of something having fallen silent. Implicit in this is an injunction to voice this question anew. Rilke observed that ‘Ultimately, and precisely in the deepest and most important matters, we are unspeakably alone’ (18). We need to voice that which has fallen silent and we do so by embracing the unspeakable.

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