

## Chapter One

# Ethos as Moral Habitat

### Ethos: Web of Moral Life

Max Stackhouse said that one of the distinctive tasks of ethics is “to define the ethos, that is, to identify, to evaluate, to arrange or rearrange those networks of norms that obtain in a sociocultural setting.”<sup>1</sup> If that is so, then it belongs to ethics to consider not just a given ethos but also what makes up ethos itself, how in general networks of norms form and change, and how they function in the moral life—particularly if we are interested in attempting to arrange or rearrange such a network. I begin this task by introducing the concept of “moral habitat” as metaphor for ethos, in order to consider the ways in which the rest of the natural world participates in the formation and functioning of an ethos.

By introducing “moral habitat” as a metaphor, I want to draw attention to the role that metaphor itself plays in the process I attempt to describe. We constantly use metaphors that build on our sensory experiences to describe our subjective experiences, whether we are aware of it or not. We move from the literal meaning of a word like “grasp” to the metaphorical meaning of comprehension when we change the predicate from something we can hold with our hands, like a ball or stick, to something we “take hold of” with our minds. Metaphors are a way of mapping across conceptual domains, and they structure the concepts we use for moral reasoning at a deep level. Similarly, ethos as moral habitat is metaphorical when it is analogous, mapping the subjective experience of living in communities of norms, meanings, values, and feelings by reference to the experience of living in biotic habitats that provide the substance for and limits to our physical lives. To use the analytical terms of Lakoff and Johnson, the source domain is the biotic habitat and the target domain is the ways in which we live within community-generated norms and meanings that form, deform, and enable us to perform as

moral agents. We already use the language of moral habitat metaphorically when we talk about “setting behavioral boundaries” or “enlarging our horizons.” I will be using the phrase “moral habitat” in one sense that is explicitly metaphorical, but I also dare, on another level, to take it as a literal expression as well, in which the word “habitat” in its conventional biotic meaning is simply modified by the adjective “moral.”

The metaphorical meaning of *ethos* as moral habitat is not imposed arbitrarily but grows “organically,” if you will, out of the ancient usage of the word “*ethos*.” While Aristotle used it to mean moral character, and it has entered Western philosophy with that meaning, Homer used the word (in the plural) to refer to the homes or accustomed places of animals in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.<sup>2</sup> This is not an eccentricity of Homer. Herodotus similarly applied it to the habitual places of lions, and Oppianus to those of fish.<sup>3</sup> Paul Lehmann finds it “humiliating, but . . . instructive to recall that the term was first applied not to humans, but to animals.”<sup>4</sup> He translates the ancient Greek *ethos* (ἦθος) with the words “stall” and “dwelling,” drawing the analogy that *ethos* provides for a human community the safety and security a stall does for an animal. But as we can see from the above examples of lions and fish, there may be a nuance of meaning locked out of that image of a safe-keeping barn, with its explicit construction and presumed security. *Ethos* has a fragrance of wildness at the same time that it conveys accustomed and proper place. It is much more akin to our word “habitat.”

One might infer from Lehmann’s statement that the use of the word for animal dwellings preceded in time its use for human dwellings, customs, and character, and that these uses represent a substantial change in the meaning of the word. This is not the case, however. Hesiod, who is generally placed in the same period of Greek literature as Homer, used it for human homes, for customs, and for disposition or character, all in the same work.<sup>5</sup> This multivalence of meaning continues through time. We have mentioned Herodotus’s use for the homes of lions. Writing centuries later than Homer and Hesiod, he also used it for human homes and customs.<sup>6</sup> And, finally, Aristotle, who clearly applied the word in a moral sense with regard to human beings, also continued to use it with reference to animals.<sup>7</sup>

The origin of the English word “*ethos*”—and the word “*ethics*”—thus intimately links place, otherkind, and morality. “*Ethos*” in common English retains a hint of this confluence of meaning, in that its collective sense—the character or characteristic spirit of a social group or movement—is often applied to a community in a particular place. The connection with animals is also not entirely lost. The study of human *ethos* and its formation is called “*ethology*,” a word whose definition includes the scientific study of animal

behavior by observation in its accustomed habitat, as opposed to laboratory experimentation.

But is this just a peculiarity of the Greek language (hanging over in English), or does it represent some insight into moral life? The multivalence of ethos in Greek, particularly its connection of ethics with place, recognizes that moral subjects are by definition subjects *in a world*, not entities in isolation, existing in some immaterial void. Even if such a detached existence were possible, questions of morality would have little point, since morality deals with patterns of relationship. An ethos is that which provides, as William P. Brown notes, “the position and orientation of the moral subject vis-à-vis the environment,” the natural-social context.<sup>8</sup> Ethos orients the subject to his/her location in terms of meaning, obligation, and value.

The concept of ethos as a network of norms also recognizes that a particular moral norm or ethic does not stand alone, but—as in a physical habitat—it exists as part of a web that is more or less coherent (and when less coherent can result in more moral conflict and confusion within a group). Any ethic proposed must deal with the norms already in place in a given ethos, and demonstrate either its adequacy in terms of “fit” with them or the inadequacy of the present constellation in some way. Not only does ethos thus provide “the sustaining environment or context for an ethic to function,” but it also furnishes the context “for a moral subject to perform. The normative claim of a particular ethic and the integrity of the moral self are determined in part by the place they assume in the larger ethos.”<sup>9</sup> It is this context in which we know who we are and how we should act.

“One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it,” according to Charles Taylor. And this includes our selves as spiritual and moral beings: “We first learn our languages of moral and spiritual discernment by being brought into an ongoing conversation by those who bring us up.”<sup>10</sup> Moral formation and discernment, then, are performances analogous to speaking a language, and so Ferdinand de Saussure’s analysis of *langue* and *parole* with regard to the practice of language is helpful to a certain degree.<sup>11</sup> Saussure identifies the *langue* as the structure and fund of a language, common to all speakers, which is drawn upon and recreated by each particular speech act (*parole*).<sup>12</sup> An ethos, like a language, provides this structure and fund for the performance of moral life by a subject. The problem with Taylor and most other communitarians is the assumption that the “other selves” in the community in which a self is formed are only those of humans, that humankind alone generates a *langue*. Most also assume culture to be entirely self-generating.

The metaphor of moral habitat expresses the sense of a sustaining environment more holistically. It includes more than human members in the community that forms and is formed by an ethos. This entertains the possibility of moral import within and a morally formative role for what we generally mean by the word “habitat.” In the case of Taylor, he is forming his argument against both the more reductive forms of naturalism that would categorize moral behavior as instinctive, and the highly individualistic assumptions of modernity. There is simply no need, however, to frame this entire question in terms of either-or, either moral nature as instinctive (“natural”) or as strictly cultural. The dichotomy disappears when humankind is understood to be part of the natural world and that what is deemed cultural is itself coproduced by humans and the rest of the biotic community.

### Ethos Formation in a More-Than-Human Community

That the morally relevant community is more-than-human is hardly a new idea; it has been gaining momentum in Western environmental circles since Aldo Leopold proposed a “land ethic” that “simply enlarges the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”<sup>13</sup> (That it takes an “extension” to our ethics to include this community says something in itself, however, about our ethics.) Many of the efforts to pursue this extension or land ethic still do not reach the point at which it “changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.”<sup>14</sup>

One reason for this, I believe, is that the present state of philosophy and of environmental or ecological ethics spends most of its effort on one side of this forming/formed-by dynamic: what human social constructs make of the rest of the natural world. In ecological ethics the concern behind this preoccupation is the material impact of human activities on the ecosystems around us and the support of these activities granted by an ethos. This concern is understandable and I share it, since the activities of at least some humans now have reached such magnitude that they are altering major life systems of the planet—climate patterns, water systems (e.g., aquifer depletion, ocean life), and life-maintaining topsoil—at an unprecedented speed and scale compared to that of most of human existence.

And at the same time as these concerns have come onto the ethical agenda, it has become clear that “people do not live in raw nature so much as in their pictures of nature, nature as humanly imaged and ‘cognized.’”<sup>15</sup> The perception of the rest of the land community is always shaped by cultural perspective. So that “nature” as an objective reality

cannot be experienced, even if it exists, apart from cultural projections upon it. I am not denying that “nature” is always “cultured” for human beings, but I am insisting that the reverse is also true, that “culture” is also always “natured” to some degree.

Without addressing the questions of what the rest of a biotic community makes of humans (in this case, human ethos) in addition to what humans make of it, the emphasis remains on the humans as actors and on human meaning making, as if this capacity erupted in discontinuity from the rest of the biosphere. Of course we need to attend to what we are doing. But this preoccupation with our own impact needs to be balanced with attention to how we are acted upon if we are to realize that “the world, even as nature, is not an external, monolithic object to be handled, whether reverently or abusively, by detached subjects; it is at its core a community.”<sup>16</sup> What kind of “community” would be constituted overwhelmingly by passive, voiceless members, who are primarily objects acted upon and not actors themselves? And what does it do to human moral formation to consider humans the only subjects in a world of objects, subjects marked—in a way that excludes all others—by moral agency?

While the metaphor of moral habitat has many features to explore, this is the one to which I will give most of my attention—the way it integrates the agency of the rest of natural world in our understanding of the moral life of a community. Like William P. Brown, I am less interested in “examining the material impact of human beings on the physical environment,” than I am “in the reverse relationship, in the environment’s impact, as conveyed by certain codified traditions,” on a group’s identity and moral character.<sup>17</sup> Among the relatively few scholars who are now attending to this side of the forming/formed-by dynamic, Brown explores it as part of his larger work in biblical creation texts, and Daniel T. Spencer introduces it into his enlargement of the social ethical idea of “social location” to “ecological location.” Ecological location “acknowledges and places at the heart of ethical analysis nature’s active agency, both as the whole ecosystem and biotic community, as well as its constituent parts of individual creatures, species, and niches.”<sup>18</sup> Spencer also suggests that “how we are shaped to see and act in the world,” in other words, ethos and agency, “results from a complex interplay of physiological, social, cultural, and *environmental/ecological* factors.”<sup>19</sup> In the context of highly anthropocentric habits of thought, we may need to put an amplifier on that interplay in order to “tune in” to the ways in which the environmental/ecological factors play into physiological, social, and cultural ones. The first step in this process is to examine how an ethos is constituted, the means by which it is produced and reproduced. From what and how does a network of norms and values arise?

A network of norms does not stand as something isolated from all other aspects of what is broadly considered “culture,” but permeates the myriad cultural practices of a people: language; stories, from sacred myth to entertainment to gossip; arrangements of space (architecture, landscape) and time (calendar, festival); ritual and ceremony; contemplative practices; procurement and preparation of food and what foods are eaten or forbidden; conduct of bodies, clothing, gestures, and attitudes toward bodies; gender and sexuality; practices of healing and reconciliation; power relations; inheritance, ownership, and trade; practices of knowledge acquisition, verification and transmission; procreation and child-rearing; poetry, music, craft, dance, and imagery; games and other play; including the technologies employed at times in much of the above. This list is not the only possible one and is not meant as an absolute. It is meant to be as inclusive as possible of a wide range of cultural practices.

Some of the elements overlap one another; bodies, for instance, are engaged in many of the other activities (sexuality, dance, ritual) in quite specific ways, and language is used throughout. These practices intersect; they also both weave and reflect the previously woven patterns of an ethos. For example, by listing “the conduct of bodies” as well as ritual, I mean to draw attention to the ways in which bodies are situated and move in ritual. To have to bend down to enter into and practically crawl to move within a low-ceilinged space dug into the ground and lined with fresh-cut cedar boughs places a ritual participant bodily in a relationship to Earth and cosmos that is not the same as walking upright up steps and entering a vast cathedral nave. Not a word need be spoken. But the words spoken—“all my relations”—in the ritual of a sweat lodge heighten attention to what is already being experienced with the body, in the ritual but also in daily existence. Yet language also, of course, shapes perception of that existence.

The importance of language in relation to ethos is widely acknowledged philosophically and by “common sense” to some degree. This common awareness of importance of language in patterning values and norms is apparent in the emotion generated by language used for God, women, people of color, sexual practices and identities, and various ethnic/national groups and regional areas. The *structure* of a language is involved as well, something that becomes evident when comparing related languages to one another, but especially striking when comparing quite different language families. The heavily noun-based structure of English and its related Indo-European languages shapes a perception of the world as being made up of discrete, fairly stable entities. A verb-oriented language, such as the Algonquian group, emphasizes processes over things. Where most European languages use gender as a grammatical category, Mi'kmaw and its related languages use animation. European languages are notable

for their concern with time, expressed particularly in English (although it is not the most extreme example) with its multitude of tenses. Mi'kmaq, by contrast, is more concerned with location and relationship, incorporating these in ways that are more subtle, complex, and pervasive than Indo-European prepositions and possessives. Different constructions are used if the subject being spoken of is present or absent, and common prefixes indicate association or kinship with the speaker and listener. Language permeates and patterns our thought; it directs our attention, prioritizing what is important in the world—distinct objects divided (according to gender) and events in time, or dynamic processes in relationship in space.

Not only are the vocabulary and structure of a language important, but so is the dominance of either orality or literacy in the use of language. David Abram argues that literacy itself affects our perception and experience of the “more-than-human world.”<sup>20</sup> While a homeland and its places can be “storied” in many cultures, only scholars with literate practices would ever think of topography in terms of a “text” that is “read,” for example, with all the distance between self and land that that implies. But as we will see below, language itself also arises in the context of environmental/ecological/bodily experiences. Because of the volume and intensity language has received, my purpose in placing it alongside other practices in this list is to remind us that it is but one among other forms of moral discourse that are possible in any culture, and it does not alone shape culture or ethos.

Religion is present in this list in the form of practices (narrative, ritual, imagery, healing, dance) rather than as a separate category for two reasons. One is that I am interested in how religious *practices* as well as ideas shape an ethos, and the other is that many nature-cultures and most religious adherents do not conceive of religion as something distinct. For them, religion is not a matter of a set of beliefs but a way of life. This is not meant to diminish its importance, just the opposite. I am trying to employ a way of thinking about cultural/social life that would be widely applicable to the diversity of human nature-cultures, in terms that would be recognizable and acceptable cross-culturally. This list is not perfect in this regard, of course. It is doubtful whether one such list or definition of culture could satisfy this requirement. But given the purposes of this work, one of which is attempting to find better paths to cross-cultural ethics, every effort needs to be made to improve the adequacy and appropriateness of how we think about other nature-cultures and the phenomena we are attempting to talk about when we say “culture.”

Clifford Geertz and others have noted the problems presented by “the multiplicity of [culture’s] referents and the studied vagueness with which it has all too often been invoked.”<sup>21</sup> He offered his definition of

culture as one without multiple referents or “unusual ambiguity,” a definition that has become highly influential in anthropology, sociology, and culture studies in general: culture is “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”<sup>22</sup>

Faced with this definition, let me speak up for studied vagueness and multiple referents. My concern is not only that this definition and Geertz’s explanation may too closely reflect our own cultural preoccupations, but in doing so assume a unidirectional process in ethos formation that negates the role of otherkind. Geertz quotes Susanne Langer that “the concept of meaning, in all its varieties, is the dominant philosophical concept of our time,” and “sign, symbol, denotation, signification, communication . . . are our stock in trade.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, *Our* time, *our* intellectual practices have until recently tended to abstract meaning, symbol, and signification from sensuality and tangibility. It does not necessarily reflect the self-understanding of other nature-cultures nor does it give a wholistic portrayal of the dynamics of culture, particularly the formation and function of ethos.<sup>24</sup>

We can, with such an emphasis, too easily slip into conceiving culture as what is conceptual and symbolic, a pattern that does not taste, smell, sound, or feel like anything. Those become accidental rather than essential attributes, and culture thereby independent of any activity or physical setting.<sup>25</sup> Geertz was reacting to the position of determinist behavioralism, a “laws-and-causes social physics.”<sup>26</sup> In doing so he reduced the importance of “behavior” or “social action” to the fact that through it cultural “forms” “find articulation.”<sup>27</sup> (His actual work demonstrates at times a more nuanced approach than his own articulation of his theory and method, however.) If forms “find articulation” then they must somehow preexist behavior and practices. In this view, culture would consist of an “essence” that is formal and abstract (conceptual and symbolic), which is then imposed upon or expressed through the materia of everyday life. (Geertz is just as contemptuous of his colleagues who work with “material culture” as he is of determinist theories and practice.) The flow is unidirectional, from concept/symbol to action/behavior/practice. This is simply too partial; such a flow exists, but the whole dynamic is much more complex. Material cultural practices shape, not merely contain or express, symbol and concept—and norm and value. And they are in turn subtly shaped by and adapted to, not only shapers of, the biotic community in which they are enacted, a point explored further below. To say this is not to endorse a simplistic biological determinism; it is to recognize the complexity of ethos generation.



There is a related difficulty in Geertz's depiction of ethos, in that he conceives of ethos as distinct from worldview and assigns a mediating role to religion. Religion (any religion)—which he differentiates from “the common-sensical”<sup>28</sup>—has as an essential element, according to Geertz, the “demonstration of a meaningful relation between the values a people hold and the general order of existence within which it finds itself.” Religious symbols not only demonstrate and store meaning according to Geertz, they actively “synthesize world view and ethos.”<sup>29</sup> And this is the part that I find problematic. “World view,” he says, is a people's “picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society.” It is the cognitive and existential aspects of a culture as distinguished from the moral, aesthetic, and evaluative—the ethos.<sup>30</sup> The problem with this formulation is that Kant was wrong; the conceptual/existential and evaluative are not neat, separate categories.<sup>31</sup> But more germane to my immediate concerns is that the values that a people hold appear to have come from nowhere, from some vague, spontaneous generation that has happened prior to their “expression” as behavior or their “relation,” via symbol, to ontology. This is not said explicitly, but there is no investigation of from whence they come or how they themselves are formed. Geertz is preoccupied (as are social constructionists as a group) with one side of the story. He quite rightly takes exception to the picture that humankind was fully biologically formed with its present attributes before the development of culture, pointing out that certain aspects of humankind—the brain and nervous system, incest-taboo-based social structure, and the capacity to create and use symbols—developed nonserially in a “period of overlap between cultural and biological change” in the evolutionary development of hominids. But even here his concern is solely with the cultural impact on biological evolution, rather than the reciprocal impact.<sup>32</sup>

We will return to this question of human biological-cultural origins below; the point I want to make clear here is that the image of a people possessing a full-blown set of values and meanings, then imposing them upon their environment and structuring it through them, or having to call upon symbols to relate otherwise unrelated categories of fact and value is just as misleading as the image of the “contractual man” of Locke, who is fully formed and functional before entering into society. Values, meanings, and norms inform practices such as those named above, of course. These cultural/social practices also serve to hold norms in place and communicate them, powerfully. But not only that. Values, meanings, and norms emerge over time and are constantly being modified within a people's tangible, sensual, material existence, its life within a larger whole. It is the wholeness of the “craftwork” of culture that constitutes an ethos,

establishing “various compatible ways of perceiving the world and acting in it in appropriate ways.”<sup>33</sup> The importance of “thick description” of a culture lies precisely in the wholeness of it, in its sensitivity to meaning, but not in an identification of meaning as the “essence” of culture.

This explains one of the sources of alarm about globalization of practices named above. The construction of “monocultures of the mind,” to use Vandana Shiva’s phrase, is via just such tangible practices. Her work traces the practices of industrial agriculture and biotechnology to demonstrate this.<sup>34</sup> Culture is imported *as practice*, and ethos thus disrupted or even replaced. Of course it is true, as Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson have argued in relation to globalization, that people are social agents, “who never simply enact culture but reinterpret and reappropriate it in their own ways.”<sup>35</sup> Gupta and Ferguson rightly object to the simplistic opposition of an autonomous local culture and a homogenizing globalization. What their argument ignores is that the alteration of the local biotic community in significant ways by economic and political powers centered elsewhere—such as in Shiva’s examples of forestry and agriculture—limits severely the options for local cultural continuity, creativity, and its very survival. Any concept of culture abstracted from nature misses this key point.

Despite Geertz’s formal approach to culture and his distinction of the evaluative and the conceptual, his characterization of ethos adds an important element to Stackhouse’s “subtle web of values, meanings, purposes, expectations, obligations, and legitimations that constitutes the operating norms of a culture in relationship to a social entity.”<sup>36</sup> Unlike Kant, Geertz does not hive off the aesthetic and affective from the moral in his definition of ethos as “the tone, character, and quality of life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood.”<sup>37</sup> Ethos is as much the atmosphere of a place and people’s collective life as it is norms that are subject to being articulated. Ethos is internally related with, constantly shaping and being shaped by, *eros*, *mythos*, and *pathos*, as well as *logos*. It is found in meaningful embodiment in a community.

I am asserting an “is,” that an ethos *is* shaped by the larger biotic community, that these factors *are* genuinely at play, even in a latemodern/hypermodern ethos distorted by a fictional Nature/Culture dichotomy. But I am also insisting that there are a couple of “oughts” bound up in this assertion of an “is”: we ought to be attentive to how we are shaped by the rest of the natural world, and those of us in a latemodern/hypermodern moral habitat ought to allow ourselves to be even more shaped by it. These two “oughts” are related. When we become more attentive to these factors in our formation, we can respond more adequately and more fully. Our ignorance of this dimension of ethos itself

limits our ability to respond, but does not eliminate the dynamic. This is not a situation of a healthy, sustainable community with a healthy, sustainable ethos. As Stephanie Lahar has observed, when we sever human experience from its organic context, we may stop being *aware* “of the shapings and natural containments that a particular environment places around human practices and social structures. *But of course environmental effects do not cease to exist.* Instead, society is shaped by a fractured relation to the ecosystem(s) it inhabits, losing both characteristic bioregional contours and a sensibility for natural limits.”<sup>38</sup>

The next task is to look specifically at how environmental/ecological factors can be understood as intrinsic to human physiology, society, and culture. We begin with the physiological as it relates to human cognition, to the development of the human brain and the way in which embodied existence in a world structures thought at a deep level, including our ethical thought. This will help us to engage more fully the ways in which environmental/ecological factors shape social and cultural practices. I want to emphasize that I am not considering these relations reductively or deterministically. On the contrary. Reductive theories such as Richard Dawkins’s concept of the “selfish gene” accord all agency to DNA molecules, as if humans as organisms and communities had none.<sup>39</sup> This is the opposite of what I am saying. Humans as organisms (and possibly other organisms as well) *do* have moral agency, *and* we have it because this is, to use Lawrence E. Johnson’s phrase, “a morally deep world.”<sup>40</sup> I am arguing that we as persons and communities have this agency because of the agency of the larger biotic communities in which we evolved and are nurtured, not in spite of the nature of these communities, or in contrast to them. True, the agency of otherkind is not identical with moral agency as it is conceived in large part by the Western philosophical and religious traditions, a point to which we will return in the context of a discussion of the deficiency in Western concepts of moral agency.

Of course this is a value-laden interpretation from the outset. So is Dawson’s idea that genes are “selfish” or his metaphorical assertion that “we are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve” those “selfish molecules.”<sup>41</sup> So are E. O. Wilson’s similar statements that “human behaviour . . . is the circuitous technique by which human genetic material has been and will be kept intact. Morality has no other demonstrable ultimate function.”<sup>42</sup> These are not objective assertions about “reality” but opinions steeped in Western instrumentalism. There is simply no value-free standpoint to take concerning the location of agency and the relationships of the rest of the natural world, human physiology, social realities, and cultures. (Such is the interplay of the biological and cultural, which I am not disputing.) When reductionist biology

pretends to ethics, the argument from common sense about ourselves as agents at an organism level fits better with the actual events.<sup>43</sup> For one thing, the existence of people who forgo having biological children as a matter of moral conviction, sometimes against a prevailing cultural norm, cannot be accounted for in a reductive scheme without convolutions, adding exception onto exception. Nor can acts of self-sacrifice (particularly life risk) for the benefit of unrelated strangers.

We pay attention to reductive, instrumental theories partly because of the prestige of their proponents and partly because we intuit the validity of the idea that the origins of the biosphere, human origins, bodies, and moral lives all have something to do with one another. Human nature-cultures generally narrate their biological and social origins in a way that implies meaning, value, and normative behavior. The narrative of evolution in no way reduces human persons to automatons and human morality to strictly a means of genetic propagation. There are entirely different ways to interpret it to begin to attend to that connection.

As in most cases, it matters how you tell the story.

### How Earth Made Us Human

When we think of the distinguishing marks of the human as a species, cognition and speech usually are at or near the top of the list. We tend to attribute anything qualifying as human culture to these capacities (along with our dexterous hands). We focus as well on the singularity of these abilities, emphasizing their *discontinuity*, rather than their continuity, with the rest of the biotic community. We (Westerners) rather smugly assume their superiority—that they are the evidence that we are of a higher order or, in the “religions of the Book,” that we are “made in the image of God.” What if we thought of every attribute that enables us to be culture making creatures, including cognition and speech, not as an imposition upon or an aberration in, but as a product of and response to the activity of a living world? It is important we examine more closely the genesis of these capacities for human culture making because we generally locate the origin of ethics in these capacities and most adamantly divorce our understanding of ourselves from the rest of the natural world on their account.

Niles Eldredge has remarked that in his conversations with creationists about evolution, he has been told that a primary objection to the theory of evolution and its story of the origin of humankind is that having so much in common with other animals would take away any source of morality.<sup>44</sup> Strict creationists aside, most Westerners would have no objection to our *physiological* origin in and kinship with the rest of the natural

world. The contention between religion and science on the matter of the biological process of creation is only between a small group of people on either side who seem to have a deficiency of imagination. Midgley is no doubt correct when she says that most Christians (and I would add other faithful people) today “readily accept that . . . God, if he could create life at all, could do it just as well through evolution as by instant fiat. Many would add that this more complex and organic performance is the greater miracle.”<sup>45</sup> Even so the gap between ourselves and otherkind is adamantly maintained when it comes to the origin of human moral capacities. Many of those people of religious faith who are untroubled by the idea of creation via evolution tend to rely on a vague and mysterious direct imprinting of the divine image, the “divine spark”—identified early on by Christian theologians with reason—to account for them. But why should it be in any sense less miraculous that moral capacity should be created as part of this “complex and organic performance” than for the whole to be created in this fashion? Why would such a capacity need to be generated apart from the whole? Why should human moral capacity be an anomaly in creation? And is it really a function of reason? What is reason?

Reason as the location of morality survived, and thrived, in the rise of the influence of secularity in Western thought, taking the place of God as the transcendent reality. In the full flood of modernity, it was also a property exclusively human (and the exclusive property of only certain kinds of humans as well). From the standpoint of either religious or secular faith, what is often shared is not only the gap between reasoning, moral humans and all Others, but the judgment about that gap. “That our moral capacities are ‘what separates us from the animals’ is widely seen, not just as a fact, but also as a necessary claim about their value,” according to Midgley. She means here the value of moral capacities—“Any doubt cast on their uniqueness is easily felt as an aspersion on the reality and importance of morality”<sup>46</sup>—but this is only a difficulty because of the way we understand and value the rest of the biosphere, and where we locate morality and agency.

We will return to many of the points in the discussion below to draw out the implications of other-than-human agency in the next three chapters and pick up again the thread of what it means for how we understand human moral agency specifically following that. The point here is to begin to trace the connections across the conceptual gap of Nature and Culture, to show how the earth has made and makes us human, so that we can think about culture, nature, and ourselves differently. This is one version of the story.

As Paul Shepard tells it, the story starts in the grass. The development of nutritional quality and quantity of energy stored in the seeds of

grasses and related plants holds latent possibilities of mind. This grass-and-seed energy fuels the herds of large grazing animals, who make the grasses' storage of surplus energy in their seeds worthwhile. Grazing prevents the forests from taking over; it maintains habitat for grass. With the gift of surplus energy in seeds, the grasses thus recruit herbivores into the process of their own propagation. And with the herbivorous herds, packs of *social* predators become possible. Mind, says Shepard, is "the child of the hunt."<sup>47</sup> Whereas at first the encounters of hunter and hunted has been largely by chance, "the stupid predator's random search and the stupid prey's contingent vulnerability," this nutritional abundance makes the "pursuit of the risky brain possible."<sup>48</sup> Memory, recognition of signs, anticipation, mental mapping of terrain, calculation of relative distance and speed, and deception, along with communication for demonstration of skills to the young and cooperation among herd or pack members—develop in predator and prey in tandem, evoked by the presence of the other, serving both. "This Cenozoic mutuality of mammalian hunter and hunted is one of the few long-standing and conspicuous episodes of reciprocal mental evolution."<sup>49</sup> Shepard bases this depiction of the development of the brain and mind on measurements of fossil crania over a period of more than forty thousand years and notes similar development in the sea. Since he is telling a story of how the earth made humans, however, the action followed is that on land. But humans are latecomers.

Even the predecessors of humans enter this drama and its development of mind when it is already long underway, "like Americans arriving, decades late, on the world's soccer fields." They join as both predator and prey, probably more the latter at first, but it is through joining what Shepard calls "the Game" that protohumans become humans. Their primate inheritance—social relations, a well-developed vocal system, and chimpanzee-sized brains—compensates for the comparative aural and olfactory disabilities of this "wily band of frog and cicada munchers, would-be meat eaters who . . . would parlay cognition into new realms."<sup>50</sup> Shepard describes the process by which early vocalizations associated with animals, plants, and places are transformed into words that marked the world as wolves would mark with urine. Through these words the minds of bipeds could carry the world in much the same way as their freed hands could carry bits of the environment. Human imagination becomes "more densely populated by recollected, imagined, represented, and dreamed forms than by tangible presences. A leap in mind was occurring in which meanings could have echoes in other realms, perhaps based initially on analogies between themselves and the other species, as when they danced the fighting. Humans tracked *into a new world of double meaning, based on an amplified relationship to plants and animals.*"<sup>51</sup>

This “leap in mind” was fueled by plants and animals, and not just in terms of calories. They were food for thought itself. The becoming-humans “acquired the universal attention of omnivory, the soul of which was the prospect of an infinite world of latent meanings.” Plants signal, among other things, types of soils (and the presence or absence of water), and, with their seasonal cycles of “sprouting, leafing, blooming, fruiting, quiescence . . . chronicle the year, keepers not only of their own periodicities but those of animals who depend on them,” and so time is registered, future and past. At the same time, “the animal world provided models for the very idea of thought.”<sup>52</sup> Animals in their similarities to and differences from one another provide a living scheme for developing mental abilities.

This is the other side of the story that social constructionists skip over. The capacity to create and use symbols is something that develops, over time, in concert with the living world, which both presents the need to do so and is composed of intrinsically meaningful entities and patterns, such as cyclical time. Take classification. Every animal must categorize its world in various ways: food, predators, potential mates, pack/herd members, species members, and so on.<sup>53</sup> Animals, in particular, according to Shepard, provoke classification based on their similarities to and differences from one another in appearance and behavior, and then further stimulate the need to accommodate ambiguity, since some animals defy easy classification (e.g., bats, who behave both like mammals and like birds). This is not just a phenomenon of physical necessity or a once-for-all evolutionary development. Human children who have animals in their vicinity demonstrate the continued relationship of that encounter to verbal and cognitive development. Shepard concludes his discussion linking language development in two-year-olds to cognitive development based on classification with the observation that “the mosaic of animal kinds is the supreme concrete model upon which this skill is achieved, and, as an added benefit, being alive, they keep before us an organic figure of reality, a world of kindred beings as the basis of a purposeful, living cosmos. The identity, names, and behavior of animals give us some of the first satisfactions of the mind.”<sup>54</sup>

It is important to the concept of ethos as moral habitat to recognize that these similarities and differences do not dictate a particular order; indeed, the presence of ambiguities actively undermines the imposition of a uniform universal ordering scheme. Biologists continue to argue about taxonomy. Nor does it imply that meanings are fixed; what is provoked is the development of the cognitive activity of ordering and the *finding* (as well as making) of meaning. I say finding in addition to making, because while meanings are not fixed, they are not necessarily arbitrary.

Strict social constructionists have gone overboard at times in their claims. Something like a tree or a mountain or a bird or a skeleton can have multiple meanings,<sup>55</sup> but it cannot mean just anything at all—a mountain does not lend itself to signifying daintiness, while a chickadee might. It is also important to the idea of ethos as moral habitat that it is a *living* world of *kindred* beings that gives us the idea of a meaningful cosmos.

In this “new world of double meaning,” into which humans tracked, where animals (and plants, topography, and weather, I might add) populate memory, imagination, and dream, we find emergence of art, narrative, ritual, metaphor—composed of and with this “living world of kindred beings.” In the signatures of the animals, their signs, lay the origin of abstraction and symbolizing in a drama we primates already “knew” was social at heart: gestures, expressions, innuendos. In less than three million years, all these categories of the self and society were shaped by the traits of animals observed, the dangerous, competitive, beautiful, tasty Others.<sup>56</sup>

From this brief look at the evolution of the physiological (body/brain) and the mind (classification, signification, metaphor), we see how many cognitive capacities that make human cultures possible—perception, memory, forethought, imagination, communication—are not only shared by other species but have been shaped in a long, dramatic interplay with this “world of kindred beings.”

And this is not the end of the story. I mean this both in the sense that humankind is not a telos of evolution and to indicate that human cognition, having once been developed, does not become a culture-generating process separate from the body or the biotic community in which cultures happen. Human cognition, even what the Enlightenment thought of as “Reason,” has not transcended its embodied state in a biotic community. To grasp this goes beyond pinning together the conceptual rift between mind and body, while continuing to conceive of our minds working in much the same way as we did before. As Lakoff and Johnson put it, “the mind is not merely embodied, but embodied in such a way that our conceptual systems draw largely upon the commonalities of our bodies and of the environments we live in.”<sup>57</sup> They argue that even abstract conceptualization and reason employ conceptual metaphors based on bodily domains such as kinesthetic experience and perception. Concepts we associate with reason work so well to “handle” our functioning in the world because “they have evolved from our sensorimotor systems, which have in turn evolved to allow us to function well in our physical environment.”<sup>58</sup>

To connect this with the *moral* of moral habitat, Lakoff and Johnson point out that our very ideas of morality are grounded in experiences of bodily well-being, and when developed into “abstract moral concepts—



justice, rights, empathy, nurturance, strength, uprightness, and so forth—are defined by metaphors . . . We understand our experience via these conceptual metaphors, we reason according to their metaphorical logic, and we make judgments on the basis of metaphors.”<sup>59</sup> Lakoff and Johnson demonstrate this point by showing how a metaphor such as *Well-being Is Wealth* generates a whole cluster of moral thought based on a kind of arithmetic: harm is taking away something of value or giving a negative value, which can only be redressed by the reverse, so that justice becomes a “settling of accounts” in which people get what they “deserve” or are “owed.”

A more direct relation of bodily experience to moral concepts can be drawn with the related basic metaphors of *Well-being as Health* and *Moral Power as Strength*, in which an upright and balanced physical posture—the normal condition of a healthy person—represents rectitude. A virtuous person is “upright” and a morally approved way of life “balanced.” Doing evil then becomes a “Fall.” Resisting evil is “standing up to” it. Being unable to resist is to be morally weak. And an immoral person is “sick.”<sup>60</sup>

Something like possession or wealth is, of course, culturally defined, although underlying any concept of wealth is the more general understanding of abundant sustenance for life. I am obviously not making a claim that culture is not a factor here. My tracing of the story of human cognitive development is intended to show that the capacity for metaphor itself, the need for and opportunity to abstract and symbolize, is generated in concert with the rest of the biotic community.

The weakness of Lakoff and Johnson’s work is that it is heavily ethnocentric in the material they draw on for analysis, a weakness they observe. Their whole discussion of rights as possessions is certainly valid for the moral thought of the culture being analyzed and perhaps others, but it is questionable whether it would hold cross-culturally. That is not their purpose, however. They wish to show that even a culture that claims, especially in the wake of Kant, to practice an abstract form of moral reasoning, a tradition whose ethical discourse is oriented to principle, has at its core metaphor. Johnson makes the strong claim that metaphor is not only an inextricable element of our moral rationality but that it is “the chief means by which we are able to imagine possibilities for resolving moral conflicts, to criticize our values and institutions, and to transform ourselves and our situations.” It is, indeed, “at the heart of our imaginative moral rationality.”<sup>61</sup>

This characterization of moral reasoning as “imaginative” does, I think, hold great potential for cross-cultural ethical discourse, in spite of the limitations of Lakoff and Johnson’s work. We will return to the moral imagination and its role in a moral habitat, but there is still an important

element of Lakoff and Johnson's work that should not escape us. In looking at what Lakoff and Johnson call the "source domains" of these metaphors, we find a partial answer to the question of where the values a people hold come from, in ways that would cross cultures.

Beginning at a very basic level, Earth has shaped the ways we understand well-being, and continues to do so at levels of more complexity and diversity. I will explain this in relation to the most basic level first, although it seems patently obvious, because it must not be taken for granted. Then I will explore the more creative and diverse ways the values a people hold are coproduced by habitat. At least some of the deep metaphors identified by Lakoff and Johnson in moral thinking are based on what people over history and in different places have commonly understood as well-being, at least for themselves: health being preferred to sickness; purity to contamination of air, food, and water; sufficiency, even abundance, to lack and want; social connection, caring, and nurturing to isolation, neglect, or indifference.<sup>62</sup> If morality implies an understanding of the good, these goods have set the most basic terms of that understanding and bind it together with the well-being of Earth, its health and fecundity. These goods form the core of what Midgley calls "the most basic repertoire of wants."<sup>63</sup> These are given by our existence as embodied beings of a social species; we share them with others of our own kind and *also with many otherkind*.

Midgley helps us to begin to clarify the interaction of goods (in the sense of what is deemed worthy, not in the strict sense of provisions), wants, and cultures in the genesis of the values a people hold. Not all wants are morally good, of course, and goods as well as wants conflict with each other at times. Cultures take an active role not only in arbitrating these conflicts but also in subtly creating preferences for certain goods and wants over others. Basic goods and wants are not the creations of cultures *ex nihilo*, however. "We are not free to create or annihilate wants, either by private invention or by culture. Inventions and cultures group, reflect, guide, channel, and develop wants; they do not actually produce them. . . . We cannot treat them as chance particulars, which might be assigned any value and which we might decide to invent or discard."<sup>64</sup> What cultures do, according to Midgley, is coordinate, fix, and develop systems of values rather than create values. "The notion of 'creating values' is a piece of nonsense—all anybody can do is adjust, develop, and extend them."<sup>65</sup>

The next question is whether cultures, beyond being a product of human cognitive capacities and social nature developed through intercourse with a world of kindred beings, and having being granted by Earth a basic repertoire of wants that form the core of our notions of "good,"

then proceed to act wholly arbitrarily and independent of this living world as they group, reflect, guide, channel, and develop wants into systems of values. My answer is that it depends. This is where the diversity of human life begins to reflect the diversity of Earth. The degree of awareness about the participation of the rest of the living world varies from culture to culture, and the ways in which it does participate may be more evident and even more powerful one place rather than another. Cultural creativity also means that cultures differ in their response to the voices other-than-human members of a biotic community, each nature-culture comprising a distinct conversation, in its own language, or rather, langue.

### Earth Conversations

Ancient and medieval writers of the West theorized effects of geographic location, climate, and topography in forming the character of a people, in ways that are at times quite sensible, but also include both the naïve and the highly objectionable. Physical characteristics such as skin color, physique, hardiness, longevity, and reproductive capacity, along with traits such as intelligence, belligerence, and righteousness were attributed to such things as altitude, waters, soil, and climate. Hippocrates' *Airs, Waters, Places* and Albertus Magnus's *De natura locorum* are prominent examples. "It would be difficult to overestimate," according to Clarence Glacken, "the amount of speculation about the influence of mountains, valleys, swamps, hard and soft environments" inspired by Hippocrates' essay with its sweeping generalizations about such influence.<sup>66</sup> For example, peoples who make their homes in well-watered lands are said to be "fleshy, ill-articulated, moist, lazy, and generally cowardly in character. Slackness and sleepiness can be observed in them, and as far as the arts are concerned they are thickwitted, and neither subtle nor sharp," while rough, waterless lands produce those who are "energetic, vigilant, stubborn and independent in character and in temper, wild rather than tame, of more than average sharpness and intelligence in the arts, and in war of more than average courage."<sup>67</sup> Or so says the Greek Hippocrates.

Given that such ancient schemes and habits of thought undergirded the European and neo-European constructions of "race"<sup>68</sup>—with all the evils of such constructions visited on bodies, minds, souls—it may seem foolhardy if not repugnant to broach the idea of environmental influence on a people, especially its moral networks. I am not going to make the kind of categorical statements that the ancients and medievalists, not to mention modernists, made with such seeming ease. But here, as with reductive gene theories, we have an intuitive sense that there is some link between climate, topography, biota, and human ways of life and

character—or Hippocrates would never have found the audience he did, even if his ideas served powerful interests.

What Earth does is present certain opportunities for and restrictions on particular forms of human development. These are not uniform in all places. Local habitat shapes perception, form and ease of livelihood, population densities, and social structures. Societies are shaped by these opportunities and restrictions in many of the cultural practices listed above. It is not a matter of programmed cultural response to environmental stimulus, however. The conversing of the human imagination in the living world creates a human moral habitat. This imagination is not a capacity that, once formed, is disengaged from context. It is continually formed, stimulated and nurtured (or restrained) by the environs in which human societies dwell and which they craft with the energy, images, and bodies of the earth community. Earth is, in so many ways, continually forming as well as being formed by, human moral imagination.

Consider how this dynamic works in relation to the development of agriculture. Agriculture requires soils created by rock, weather, plants (lichens), and animals—as well as plants nutritionally worth cultivating and reliable sources of water. But these can take many forms, with varied consequences. Westerners tend to associate the development of agriculture with the “Fertile Crescent” and emphasize its role in the rise of settled populations, cities, and hierarchies—when surplus food made it possible to engage whole groups of people in non-food-producing endeavors. The fixation on our own origins ignores the independent (if somewhat later) development of quite different agricultural techniques practiced by forest peoples such as the Kayapo.<sup>69</sup> In rainforests, the productive layer of topsoil is thin, easily depleted, so they used a sophisticated system of swidden cultivation that required the reversion of planted areas to forest after just a few years. These swiddens were relatively small areas, cultivated on a rotational basis (sometimes a decades-long rotation), and spread over a large area, in concert with practices that built up the soil in between nonforest plantings. This apparently has been practiced sustainably for thousands of years. In contrast to the styles of agriculture made possible in the broad valleys of Egypt and Mesopotamia, this form of agriculture did not lend itself to permanent settlement or stratification of society. The point is that the difference in the topography and soil character shaped both livelihood and social structures.

Yi-Fu Tuan describes how a dense rainforest environment also forms capacities for perception itself and thus shapes cultural practices. A rainforest dweller is immersed in a relatively undifferentiated environment. Very little can be seen from a long distance; everything is seen at close range, and shades of green dominate. The forest canopy obscures

moon and stars, and seasonal fluctuations are minimal. So vision becomes acute at close range, and the cues for perspective—relative size of a visual image signifying distance and not just the size of an object—are not (in Tuan's term) "read." It is sound instead that becomes the cue to distance, location, speed, and size. And so one dances with an embracing forest of subtle rhythms and meaningful sound, rather than locating oneself in an expansive cosmos. For the BaMbuti of the Congo, this means that songs and music, not surprisingly, become an extremely important element, even the focus, of rituals. And it is the sound of the song, rather than words, which is important. Closeness with the forest, embrace, is acted out in the practice of initiating a newborn, circling its waist and wrists with vines to which are tied small pieces of wood. And the location for lovemaking is in a forest clearing, rather than a hut.<sup>70</sup>

Tuan contrasts this inhabitation of a world with that of various Pueblo peoples of the Southwest United States. Here, space, shape, direction, verticality, and color are the vocabulary of culture and value that orient human members of the community. In a dry land, springs become locations and foci of ritual, and rituals are patterned by a sun-marked seasonality. Solstices determine planting and dancing, house building and hunting times. Springs not only provide the source and continuity of life in an area, they function spiritually and as a source of cultural identity. The small spring near Paguate village recalls the original Emergence Place and, in the description of Leslie Marmon Silko, it links "the people and the spring water to all other people and to that moment when the Pueblo people became aware of themselves as they are even now. The Emergence was an emergence into a precise cultural identity."<sup>71</sup> The Emergence is that event in which "all the human beings, animals and life which had been created emerged from the four worlds below when the earth became habitable,"<sup>72</sup> during which the human beings had to rely on the assistance and benevolence of antelope and badger. Silko explains that the stories of Emergence and especially Migration and their geographical features create a "ritual landscape" for an "interior journey" of collective self-consciousness, not an historical one in the modern sense.

The survival demands of the land required such a cultural-imaginative journey: "Life on the high arid plateau became viable when the human beings were able to imagine themselves as sisters and brothers to the badger, antelope, clay, yucca and sun. Not until they could find a viable relationship to the terrain, the landscape they found themselves in, could they *emerge*."<sup>73</sup> In the Hopi tradition, it is the very starkness and difficulty of life in the high desert mesas they inhabit that keeps the people spiritually attuned. The clarity of the desert air, the vast visible distances, the extremes of temperature and scarcity of water magnify the

impact of each feature and creature. Nothing is overlooked or taken for granted. Each ant, each lizard, each lark is imbued with great value simply because the creature is there, simply because the creature is alive in a place where any life at all is precious." In order to survive in such a place "every possible resource is needed, every possible ally—even the most humble insect or reptile. You realize you will be speaking with all of them if you intend to last out the year."<sup>74</sup>

The importance of this shaping of perception and provision of the context/content of imagination by topography, biota, and climate, is that perception and imagination function together as a nexus of subject and world, funding the process of moral agency. According to Iris Murdoch, "I can only choose within the world I can see . . . if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over."<sup>75</sup>

Murdoch discusses moral perception and attention in terms of sight, perhaps to the detriment of the intimacy of sound, of conversation. Silko draws on both senses to situate pueblo people in a visually rich place of peril, in which survival itself is contingent on conversant relationship as well as what is "seen." Moral "imagination" should not be limited by its etymological root to the sense of sight, however, or we risk losing vital connections and dimensions of moral life. But if we expand the visual metaphor to include that of conversation, Murdoch's fundamental point is just as strong.

Moral imagination functions in several ways in the formation of a moral habitat, just as moral habitat (ethos) shapes moral imagination. One way in which it does so is the development of a capacity to empathize, to imagine what it is like to be Other, and to connect our emotions with such an imagination. A second function is the capacity to imagine ways in which conditions could be other than they are. How else could we live? Without some way of envisioning this, there is no sense talking about what is the matter with how we do live. Without a larger Earth community in which to reflect, we (humans or First Worlders) are captive in self-determined interests. And as Thomas McCullough points out, the moral imagination broadens and deepens the context of moral decision making in that it considers an issue in the light of the whole, by which he means not only the complex interrelated functional aspects of society—economic, political, and social institutions—but also "the less tangible but most meaningful feelings, aspirations, ideals, relationships."<sup>76</sup>

Pursuing the imaginative and metaphorical participation of the rest of the biosphere—and the indispensable role of the imaginative and

metaphorical—in human moral life refutes the idea that there is anything “mere” about metaphor or imagination. They are crucial modes of knowing, operating even when we ostensibly discount them (or emotion) in favor of an ideal of abstract reason. As such, they are integral to the process of moral formation, personal and collective, and of moral reflection.

The point is not that other-than-human nature determines human culture but that it participates in it, that the cultural and the “natural” are so implicated together that even the capacities that we identify strongly with the cultural, including abstract thought regarding morality, can be traced across the conceptual divide we have put between ourselves and the rest of the biosphere. In the development of language, cognition, imagination, and social nurturance, in the origin of metaphor and its role in relating bodily experience into explicit systems of abstract moral thought—everywhere we find ourselves shaped by our embeddedness in the biotic community as a whole. Our spiritual, intellectual, moral capacities are “nature’s own flowering in the form of us.” They are “home grown” not alien.<sup>77</sup>

But surely this is as far as we can go in pulling threads together across the divide between human and otherkind. Other-than-human nature *in itself* has no moral content, apart from human beings, does it? The “morality” of evolution points straight to Social Darwinism, doesn’t it? And even if Mind is the “child of the Hunt,” doesn’t the *moral* nature of mind consist precisely in that it “rises above” a Nature that is “red in tooth and claw,” to reflect on, prioritize and arrange values? What about religious claims to revelation that transcends the created order? Fair questions. The kind of questions, however, that could lead us around the bend that makes a culture “in and of nature” run “full grain against it.”<sup>78</sup> So they require care in how we seek answers. In order to do so, we will approach predation, evolution, and revelation from different directions in the following chapter.

Yet if we move on to consider the insights from cultures outside of the dominant Western worldview, leaving the discussion of the role of other-than-humankind in the realm of metaphor alone, we have created a barrier to taking their insights seriously. Moreover, the question of an “earth conversation,” even if it would not be dismissed as completely imaginary (that is, unreal), is from that point on ultimately in the domain of the human. Human thought and language, and the language of human culture, may be evoked in response to otherkind, but once taken out of the realm of actual encounter, there is little opportunity for ongoing dialogue. It is in moments of encounter that we come to know, as Adrienne Rich describes, that “the Great Blue Heron *is not a symbol . . . it is a bird. . . .* The tall, foot-poised creature had a life, a place of its own in the manifold, fragile system that is this coastline;

a place of its own in the universe. . . . *Neither of us—woman or bird—is a symbol, despite efforts to make us that*” (emphasis mine).<sup>79</sup> Verbal speech is, indeed, what “my kind of creature does” to acknowledge the being before us, but it is provoked by that being, and it is not the only form of speech or conversation taking place.

According to Donna Haraway, the world “neither speaks itself nor disappears in favour of a master decoder.”<sup>80</sup> But what if it does speak itself—in a language in which we have lost fluency or mere competence in the process of developing our own highly specialized form of speech, or in our narcissistic preoccupation with the kinds of things our kind of creatures do, in our taking a stand conceptually “outside” the conversation, or even, as Abram suggests, in the process of developing written language? A return to the Sassurian concept of *langue* could help us think beyond speech as a human monopoly, beyond human languages of words and grammatical structures and open the conversational context to consider more-than-human participation as ongoing. Even human-to-human conversation is not limited to vocabulary and grammar. It consists of facial expression, posture, gesture, touch, and nonverbal sound. Both culturally specific meanings are conveyed, as well as meanings that can be shared across cultures. Given the power of such modes of communication, it is necessary to include them in the category of conversation. Whatever the capacities particular species (such as dolphins) may have for intraspecies communication, *interspecies* communication continues, although humans are not always participants. Certain cultures lack fluency, or deny the possibility by defining communication in terms of vocal speech. But if we consider the *langue* of a biotic community to include gesture, expression, posture, and nonverbal sound, then every member of the biotic community can be understood as performing *parole*. We can think of each bioregion as having its own *langue*, dialect, or patois. And just as Taylor makes the analogy between language and moral discourse, we can begin to entertain a different approach to understanding moral formation and agency.

And finally, in moving to acknowledge the biotic community as formative, it is important to affirm that its relational nature is not merely communicative or imaginative, but it is emotive as well. Our sensual, embodied engagement with other-than-humankind can evoke strong passions to sustain our commitments to other beings and to the places in which we dwell and dream together.