

Language is Phenomenal:

A Phenomenological Perspective of Language and How It Influences Our
Relationship with Nature

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Many linguistic scholars or introductory anthropology students may be familiar with the “Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax,” which arose in response to Franz Boas’ 1911 book *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, wherein Boas claimed that Inuit and Yupik people had over a hundred different words for snow. This number just seemed absurd and led a number of people to believe that Boas had exaggerated or lied in order to garner attention or prestige. While the term “Eskimo” is no longer considered appropriate to refer to those of Inuit or Yupik descent, the claim that there are a hundred different words for snow is in fact not far off from the truth. There are names for snow that is on land versus in the sea; there are names for snow that has just fallen, or is currently falling, and there are words that encompass the varying intensity of the snowfall. There is even a word for snow that is good for sledding. The high number of names used to describe snow may seem completely unnecessary to those of us in a more temperate region, but it reflects the highly involved and intimate relationship that Inuit and Yupik people have with their environment and its natural forces.

Language provides a great insight into the values of a particular culture or group of individuals because it has evolved to suit the ideas and the needs of the people employing it. While it changes somewhat in response to their experiences, it also helps to shape their experiences. Traditionally, oral cultures have had an intimate relationship with the natural world and the forces, both animate and inanimate, behind natural phenomena. They understood that we have a close connection with the forces around us, and we depend upon them to continue our everyday life of constant perceptual experiences. However, the way that language is used today by people and society has unfortunately worked to separate us from the natural world, from our own perceptual experiences, and led to the highly tenuous relationship that we currently have with nature: we assume our superiority over it and ignore the fundamental inextricable involvement we have with the natural world.

It is often too easy to take for granted all that humans have accomplished and are capable of. One of the things that often goes unappreciated is our ability to communicate and the creation of the social phenomenon that is expression and language. We use it every day -- whether verbal or not, humans are constantly expressing and communicating their ideas and thoughts to one another through the use of a developed linguistic medium.

A Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of language will include the primary entry “the words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used and understood by a community.” It will go on to tell the reader that language can also be defined as an “audible, articulate, meaningful sound as produced by the action of the vocal organs,” or “a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meanings,” or “the suggestion by objects, actions, or conditions of associated ideas or feelings.”

Such definitions, while seemingly concise and comprehensible, can be misleading. They seem to suggest that language is the expression of our so-called interior thoughts and processes, which already have innate meanings that we voice through speech; it implies that we must have thoughts and ideas held within our minds, and we use language whenever we want in order to share them. It also seems to imply that we need these interior thoughts in order to create a language. Only through expression can these thoughts come to be known, and without these thoughts to be expressed, there is nothing for our expression to convey. This is a false assumption, and this way of thinking about language is a hindrance to our true understanding of the world. We are bodied beings, and language is the embodiment of thought.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty summarizes this concept in his 1945 book, *Phenomenology of Perception*, in a few simple words: speech is thought. In expressing our thoughts and ideas through speech, they come to be the same thing. It is not that language is a tool that we can pick up and put

down whenever we want -- it is not a passive phenomenon, a means of disinterested denomination, but instead is an instrument of action. Thought and language are not ontologically dependent on one another or are caused by one another; instead they coexist, and come to be the same through expression. Speech does not translate a ready-made thought; rather, it accomplishes thought. The thoughts that we have within our head cannot truly be our own until they are expressed. There is no other explanation for why our thoughts "tend toward expression as if towards completion" (Merleau-Ponty 2012).

Merleau-Ponty says that the "thinking subject himself is in a sort of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them for himself, or even spoken or written them..." (2012). This assertion seems to align with our everyday life and our own experiences. For example, if I am taking a course for college that is a necessary part of my degree requirements, but I personally have no interest in the subject matter, it will be difficult for me to understand the meanings and ideas if I am merely a passive recipient. If I simply sit in the lecture, and listen to the professor drone on, and I do not involve myself in the discussion or take notes on the lecture and my own thoughts on it, it will be much easier for the information to slip through the cracks in my consciousness and escape me when it comes time for the final exam. Developing and understanding meaning requires an active participation; it requires expression. While my perception is an embodied and ultimately unescapable phenomenon, whether or not I actualize my thoughts and sensations is dependent upon my expression of them.

Meaning is not something that we can pick up and carry with us wherever we go. It is through expression, through the embodiment of our thoughts, that we are able to constantly develop, understand, and ultimately have meaning. Because perception, as we will see, is a fully immersive and embodied experience, the context in which I am speaking and expressing is crucial to the development of the meaning I am shaping through my words.

It is natural for us to think that the words we hear in our heads and the thoughts we possess already have meaning; it is hard to believe otherwise. How could we deliberate on something if we did not already know what it meant? This apparent predicament arises because we currently live in a world that presents us with fewer and fewer opportunities for unique and novel thought. It seems as if everything has already been figured out; we know what everything is, and we know what it means, for the most part. We think we know what the words we use mean in an everyday sense because we have been taught that way, and it is hard to wrap our minds around the idea that we are constantly creating the meaning through our experience and then through speech and expression. Our ability to interpret, understand, know, and remember and recall the meanings of words cannot be denied, but it is important that we do not forget the source of the meanings -- our perceptual experiences and the expression of our bodied selves.

In 524, medieval philosopher Boethius' conversation with Philosophy brought him to the distinguished realization that "everything that is known is comprehended not according to its own nature, but according to the ability to know of those who do the knowing." It is the capacity of the observing person to attain knowledge that allows us to make distinctions and assertions and therefore gain knowledge about specific subject matter; it is not dependent upon the matter itself. Over a thousand years later, this idea can be heard echoing throughout the claims that Maurice Merleau-Ponty makes in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. The human body is the always-given reference point for any observation or experience. It is what "continuously breathes life into the visible spectacle, animates it and nourishes it from within" (2001). Our bodies are what allow us to give meaning to all of the things around us, from the pencils on a desk to the beauty of the sun as it rises. Without the body, we would have no way to experience the world around us.

Without a physical body, humans would have no means of interacting with the world. What is an experience if one can neither see, touch, taste, smell, or hear it, if one cannot perceive it at all? Physical senses, which are used to evaluate the world around us, are inextricably bound to our bodies. Without a set of eyes containing functioning rods and cones and physical pathways to the brain, one would not be able to see; one could not receive visual cues and information. The same can be said for the ears, the tongue, the nose, the fingers, or any other surface of the body that is riddled with nerves and receptors. The beauty of a painting has no meaning if one cannot see it, cannot perceive the artful brushstrokes or the ingenious use of color and positioning. The frigid breeze outside has no effect if one lacks the nerves to sense the temperature.

Take for example the Brita pitcher on the table before me. Because I am able to perceive it and I am able to interact with it, I know certain things about it. I know the pitcher itself, though the filter has not been changed in several months, still serves a purpose. I know that if I were thirsty, I could pour myself a relatively clean, filtered glass of water from it to drink, though I probably would not, because I also know, through experience and recollection, that the pitcher is in fact filled with cheap filtered vodka. By itself, the pitcher serves no purpose; it does not determine whether it is holding water or vodka. Only through interacting with me, being a part of my experience, does the pitcher begin to take shape as a functional household object with distinguishing characteristics.

Because I possess these sensorial organs, I am susceptible to constant perception. It becomes an inescapable phenomena; so long as I am physically capable of perceiving, I will be constantly inundated by the multiplicity of experiences around me. Perception is not optional; it is fully involved. I exist as a fully bodied being in a bodied world. Neither I nor anyone else can exist independently of the objects and forces around us. I am not a distinct being from the computer or the desk at which I sit; I interact fully with these objects through my perception of them. I cannot separate myself from my body (and if I

did manage to make the split, could I still consider that to be “myself”?), and so I cannot separate myself from my experiences.

Perception, therefore, becomes a precursor to thought; precept is prior to concept. It is both the necessary and sufficient conditions for the formation of our thought through experience and the completion of our thoughts through expression. It is through my experiences that I come to attain knowledge. I perceive the active agents around me (for every object is active in the sense that it participates in my experience of the world), and I learn from them. What written language has done is make the concept available to us without any direct perception of it. This is how we can discuss giraffes or Thailand without ever having experienced either of these things. While this is part of what makes language so great, this access to the concept alone causes us to forget about the role of our immersive perception in our experience of life.

There are many ways that we come to know things -- we read facts in books; we watch movies; we participate in hands-on laboratory experiments -- but the fact remains: we are the ones doing these things, we are the ones participating in the act. We, as bodied human beings, have experiences that allow us to gain knowledge about particular subjects. Our ability to know is therefore based on the abilities of our human bodies. If I cannot hear, then there is a whole realm of auditory sensations and experiences that I can never fully evaluate and appreciate. The same can be said for sight, smell, taste, and touch sensations. It can therefore be said of the whole human body: without a body, I have no means of experiencing any of the natural forces and entities around me, no way to develop beliefs and opinions, and no way to acquire any knowledge whatsoever. And because I am indeed in possession of this body, I am forced to experience.

It is through the body that we are able to have objects. In taking hold of objects, the body becomes the source of meaning. Because there are multiple bodies, then it follows that there would be

multiple meanings for the same single object. All meaning then becomes contextual, that is, given in a certain context, because it is impossible to separate the object from its background and the fact that it is being interpreted and experienced by a sensing individual (Marshall 2008). This is why oral expression is so crucial to developing meaning and completing the thought. Because each individual exists in a subjective, interconnected reality, only through their outward expression can we evaluate the situation or message that they are trying to convey; it remains inaccessible otherwise. The oral expression of a feeling or thought, while still subjective, makes it available to others who are able to understand and interpret the words or verbal gestures being made.

All of the meanings that have been created come to be completed through expression, specifically through speech. At times, it seems as if language and linguistic expression provide us with absolute truths and meaning. For example, in scientific fields, subjects such as diseases and species are categorized and described and named according to our interpretation and observations of them -- the names that we give them seemingly define them. Once we have given something a name, it appears that that is the end of it. The name can hold and convey all that we need to know about the thing in question. When a doctor diagnoses someone with follicular or nodular non-Hodgkin lymphoma, it is because they have discovered that the cells in the patient's lymphatic system are slowly growing out of control. The other attending physicians will know then that the patient is likely to respond well to radiation and chemotherapy, but they may have to prescribe them a monoclonal antibody combination of rituximab and bendamustine. When a biologist says they are radio-tracking two *Didelphis virginiana* specimens, their colleagues will understand that the biologist is following Virginia opossums with transmitter collars through the woods with a large antenna and receiver.

In these cases, it is clear to see that language seems to present us with concrete meanings and consequences. However, this is not actually the case. Language does well to convey meanings, because

this is a crucial part of what makes language what it is, but Merleau-Ponty claims that these meanings are not absolute. It is evident that even so-called objective science cannot present us with consistent, unquestionable definitions and explanation when examined in a broader or historical sense.

In the late 1800's, ancient dinosaurs were separated into two clades, Ornithischia and Saurischia, based on hip structure. Fossil evidence revealed that the Ornithischian dinosaurs had an "opisthopubic" pelvis, where the pubic bone extended backwards towards the rear of the animal. This trait is present in modern birds, and it led the scientific minds at the time to believe that the Ornithischian dinosaurs, which included large, long-necked herbivores, were the ancestors of birds -- hence the name Ornithischian, from the Greek *ornith-*, meaning "of a bird." However, this was an erroneously premature distinction; years later, we learned that modern birds are more closely related to the Saurischian dinosaurs. The Saurischian dinosaurs, which included bipedal carnivores like the velociraptor and tyrannosaurus, had a "propubic" pelvis in which the pubic bone extended forward, towards the anterior of the animal. The pelvis in birds was therefore secondarily derived, and had nothing to do with the shape of their ancestors' pelvises. The distinction "Ornithischian" remains as somewhat of a misnomer now; introductory biology students with common sense or a rudimentary knowledge of Greek etymology will initially be led to believe that these dinosaurs are somehow related to birds, when there is in fact no evolutionary relationship between these two groups of organisms.

Even in the "hard sciences," nothing can be absolute. Our knowledge is always changing and expanding due to the shifting nature of our perception, and language is not exempt from this. Unfortunately, our language also has the ability to shift our perception. When language solidifies concepts for us, the role of perception becomes less important, or even unnecessary, to the formation of thought and understanding, and becomes stagnant; it is fixed in one place by the meanings that language implies are absolute. Language, as Merleau-Ponty says, is an extension of the "deeply

interconnected matrix of sensorial reality itself," and as our perception of this world changes, so too should our language (Abram 1996). It is not that higher-order structures of thought and value are being reduced to mere terms of perception. Merleau-Ponty wants to show how the most fundamental structures of perception simply reappear, albeit transformed and now a little more complex, but still recognizable, in our so called higher-order activities like thinking, reasoning, and imagining (Edie 1975).

We discover new species that need to be catalogued and described; we learn more about the interaction between subatomic particles, and rewrite our definitions to better reflect what we now know about their properties and nature. We become aware of new sensations, of new means of examining and testing hypotheses, and we gain a better overall understanding of the way things work and how we fit in among them. This is perhaps one of the most important aspects of our perceiving life: how we fit in the grand scheme of things. It is a question that is present in almost every rational being's life and has sparked infinitely many discussions and philosophical debates about the nature of reality and our own existence and place in the world. What is our purpose in life? Where do we fit in among all the creatures and plants and rocks on earth? What is our relationship -- are we connected, or separate? Are we susceptible to the forces of nature, or do we exist independently of them? The question that we are attempting to examine now has to do with the place of humans in relation to the natural world; what is our relationship with nature? While a majority of these debates lie outside the scope of this paper, it is clear that we have attempted, in numerous ways, to find answers to these questions that can be accessible to all people across space and time. However, knowing what we know about perception and experience thanks to Merleau-Ponty, it is becoming more and more clear that such attempts, while noble, are inevitably problematic.

It is impossible to have an un-embodied experience of something, and so it is impossible to have a meaning or an explanation that is wholly objective. What scientific fields have attempted to do is

establish a completely objective perspective of phenomena that can be accessible to all people in all places at all times. The objective perspective, stripped of any emotion, bias, influence, or subjective undertones, can never fully be achieved. Every observation, no matter how unbiased or impartial it may be, is still made from the point of view of a subjective, experiencing subject. Perception is participation, and it is not optional. Even when we are unconscious or sleeping, our body responds to the physical sensations around us: we kick blankets off because we are hot, we pull them up to our chin and curl into a ball when we are cold; we are woken up by loud noises or frightening dreams. The body is a constantly sensing system, and we cannot truly escape its scope of perception.

Here, one may begin to question what the problem is, then. If experience is wholly participatory, and the act of perceiving is involuntary in that we have no choice but to partake in it, then how is it that we became separated from it? If our awareness is dependent upon the existence of the potentially animate and expressive phenomenon we perceive, then how can we come to lose these aspects? If we exist in an animate and expressive world, how did we come to break free from it and step foot into an objective, inanimate realm?

The answer is that we have not -- we only think we have. The change in our language from a strictly oral tradition to one that is written and documented has shifted our mindset and made it easier for us to forget the close, inescapable ties that we have with the animate world. We do not stop perceiving or experiencing or expressing; we merely misunderstand what it is that we are seeing or saying. Our contrived separation from the animated world has allowed us to conquer, to step outside of ourselves and our sensorial experience of the world and commandeer the land and the natural phenomenon to serve our own end.

Our use of a highly conventionalized written language, as we will see, has given us a false sense of self and led us to believe that we can in fact be separated from the world, that we exist

independently of the blowing winds outside our window and the hard-backed chairs in which we sit.

This separation of the individual from the animate world is what has caused such a disturbance between human and natural relationships, because it is not in our nature to exist independently of the world; we belong in an active, reciprocal exchange with both the animate and inanimate forces surrounding us, and we depend upon them to continue our perceiving existence.

The origins of the human language could fill an entire dissertation on its own. There are numerous theories and hypotheses and stories that elaborate on the founding of the complex linguistic systems that we know and use every day. For our purposes, we need not go so in-depth and examine every possibility. We will use both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and David Abram to explain that regardless of the historical origins of language and expression, it is undeniably linked with our interaction and perception of the animate world around us.

David Abram describes how Merleau-Ponty wrote at length in *Phenomenology of Perception* about the gestural origins of our expression, how “communicative meaning is first incarnate in the gestures by which the body spontaneously expresses feelings and responds to changes in its affective environment” (1996). Abram agrees with this notion, summarizing the concept into a neat, succinct claim that we thus learn our native language not mentally but bodily.

Regardless of where our true origins lie, the fact that humans (and our ancestors) have always possessed a set of sensorial organs cannot be argued. It is irrelevant whether or not they were as evolved and advanced as the structures that we possess today, for their mere existence necessitates an active perception of the surrounding world. For as long as we have been capable of perceiving the forces and objects around us, we have been engaging in an active experience of the world. Like our thoughts, our actions cannot exist in isolation. They are influenced by the phenomena around us and each action

is connected to a thought or emotion that we have. It is only through expression, and later on, conventionalized language, that we are able to communicate those emotions to those around us.

As Merleau-Ponty and Abram agree, our expression was first entirely bodily. We are, and always have been, bodied beings living in an embodied world. The gestural expressions of emotions and thoughts are innate to our being. As Abrams says, we do not learn language by “consciously studying the formalities of syntax and grammar or by memorizing the dictionary definitions of words, but rather by actively making sounds” (1996). It is clear that we did not need to be taught how to laugh or cry or frown or smile when we are happy or sad. Newborn babies and toddlers participate in these expressions without ever being told what each one of these gestures means to a fully-formed and coherent human being. Their vocal and gestural expressions *are* their thoughts and feelings, a direct result of our sensorial involvement in the world. Across time and space, between cultures and nationalities, these gestural expressions are somehow encoded within our being, and they serve as the most basal form of expression and means to completing our thoughts.

Merleau-Ponty and Abram, however, diverge when it comes to the subjects of our experiencing life. Whereas Merleau-Ponty wants to focus on the whole of existence, Abram speaks in regards to only those active, animate entities, though he uses Merleau-Ponty’s work to help him do so. Merleau-Ponty wants to say that we are connected with every entity or object around us, both animate and inanimate. We have relationships with people and animals and plants, and we also have relationships with chairs and pencils and books, even though these inanimate objects cannot have a relationship with us, because they are not active, sensing agents. Abram focuses on our relationship with the strictly animate natural entities in the world -- people and rabbits and flowers and even mountains and rivers, things that are able to “sense” and respond to the other entities around them.

Regardless of the object, the nature of perception remains highly involved, active, and, in some senses, reciprocal. There is no individual being, no student that can exist separately from the tables and desks and chairs in a classroom. Merleau-Ponty would say that there is in fact a system, an interconnected relationship between all the objects and all the people in the room, coexisting and participating in this sensorial reality together. Even though it is the body that is able to take hold of objects and speak to express itself, this disclosure of the body's expressiveness extends outward to the "whole sensible world," and our means of perception, prompted by the experience of our body, will "discover in all other 'objects' the miracle of expression" (Merleau-Ponty 2012). Abram would diverge slightly from this idea and he says that at the most primordial level, when we interact specifically with the animate forces around us, we find ourselves in "an expressive, gesturing landscape, in a world that speaks" (1996).

When we find ourselves in a world that speaks, as Abram says, it is not strange to assume that our oral expressions would come to mirror those of the natural world. Abram paints the picture of a nearby flowing river, and how we use words such as *rush*, *splash*, *gush*, or *wash* to describe it, because they are the words that the river itself seems to chant as it flows between the banks (1996). Language is not a purely mental phenomenon, something that we created to use as a tool whenever we please. It is the result of "carnal reciprocity and participation... influenced by many gestures, sounds, and rhythms besides those of our single species" and as a result, our language "belongs" to us as much as it "belongs" to the animate landscape (Abram 1996).

However, there is much more to support the formation of written language as being directly rooted in the animate world. Archeological evidence suggests that the subsistence of humankind has depended upon the acuity of hunters and gatherers for millions of years, their ability to read the traces left behind by the animal "Others" a crucial element in our human evolution (Abram 1996). The dark

blotches of ink on a page are hardly different from the footprints of a deer or a rabbit left in the snow. We read them in an attempt to gain an understanding of the world around us, to learn more about whatever it is we are perceiving. We have used these animate “Others” to help form our own way of marking the world, of leaving a trace that can later be read and understood by those more like ourselves. Abram discusses several forms of early written language that are directly tied to these animate “Others.”

There are pictographic systems, such as the iconic Egyptian hieroglyphics, which include characters that have now come to be referred to as “ideograms.” The ideograms are often pictorial characters that do not necessarily refer to the visible entity depicted, but to some quality or other phenomenon associated with that entity (Abram 1996). Abram gives the example of how an image of a jaguar with its feet off the ground may come to symbolize “speed.” These “pictorially derived systems,” he argues, come to entail a shift of sensory participation away from the voices and gestures of our surrounding landscape towards our own human-made images, yet they still continue to remind the reading body of its inherence in a “more-than-human field of meaning” (Abram 1996). While the pictographic systems were handy when communicating across neighboring or distant linguistic communities, there was still a problem of how to convey more abstract terms and concepts used in our dialogue, such as “belief” or “beauty.” We then see the emergence of other linguistic mediums, such as rebuses and syllabaries, all of which present with their own distinct set of difficulties or limitations.

The formation of the Semitic *aleph-beth* helped to reduce the number of symbols previously used to convey meaning down to 22, becoming a much simpler, and more accessible, means to write and learn language. A character, or letter, was created for each consonant, and left the sounded breath (the vowel) up to the discretion of the reader/speaker, who would change the sounded breath according to the written context. The utter simplicity of this new written language led to its adoption by not only

the Hebrews, but by the Phoenicians, Aramaeans, Greeks, and Romans, and eventually gave rise, either directly or indirectly, to virtually every alphabet known, including the 26-letter system we use today (Abram 1996).

The most interesting -- and relevant -- part about the *aleph-beth* is its direct connection to the animate world and the animate "others" involved in it. It is true that this linguistic system no longer evoked a reference to a specific depicted phenomenon as in the pictographical systems, but instead to a strictly human phenomenon: the oral evocation and specific sounds made by the mouth. It seemingly adds another layer of separation between humans and the rest of nature, but upon further investigation, this is not entirely the case. When examining the letters of the *aleph-beth*, it is clear that they are still implicitly tied to the more-than-human field of phenomena. Abram says that we can easily recognize the "pictographic inheritance" in the letters of this early Semitic linguistic system (1996). For example, the first letter, *aleph*, is also the Hebrew word for ox, and the shape of the letter closely resembles that of an ox head with horns, and when turned upside down, becomes our own letter A. The same trend can be seen in the letter *qoph*, which is drawn as a circle with a dangling tail because it is also the Hebrew word for monkey; or *mem*, the Hebrew word for water, drawn as a series of waves, which correspond to our modern letters Q and M, respectively.

However, it is clear that, while still dependent upon the animate world, these letters' ties to the natural world and the body itself are far more tenuous than the earlier, non-phonetic scripts; the animals, the plants, and the natural elements begin to lose their voices while we develop ours (Abram 1996). As the *aleph-beth* was adopted by other cultures, the animate forces became less and less relevant. When the Greeks took hold of it, they removed any and all sensorial reference to the natural world: *aleph* became *alpha*, *beth* became *beta*, and so on and so forth. The pictorial and iconic significance that the *aleph-beth* had was lost as the Greek names for the letters now served only to

designate the human-made letter itself, allowing for the indebtedness of the human language to the more-than-human world, preserved in the names and shapes of the Semitic letters, to be entirely forgotten (Abram 1996).

While the *aleph-beth* still served as a reminder of our close, implicit ties with the natural world, the more-than-human sphere of existence, its nature as a written form of language simultaneously served to distance us from our sensorial perception and experiences of the world. The knowledge embedded in the words formed out of the letters and the information they conveyed was now captured for the first time in a “visible and fixed form, which could be returned to, examined, and even questioned” (Abram 1996). We had something physical before us, and regardless of whether it was scratches on a section of bark or ink splotches on papyrus, it opened up a world of possibilities. The written language could now be freely used in a way that a strictly oral language could not. For while the acoustic medium was incapable of visualization and therefore nearly inseparable from the individual using it, the written, alphabetized document could become objectified; it was no longer just a “function of ‘me’ the speaker but a document with [its own] independent existence” (Abram 1996).

As the words come to be put on paper, put there by our own doing, one develops a sense of power over the words. What once was a blank slate is now covered in intricate symbols, a beautiful piece of art that conveys meaning to those lucky enough to be able to interpret it. It would appear as if we decide the meaning, since we are the ones actively writing, bringing these words into being. While it has an existence separate from ourselves, it is still dependent upon us. With a swipe of the hand we can erase the board, and the words are no longer there; they cease to exist. They become a means at our disposal, and language becomes a tool that we can use whenever we please. This “independent existence” that language now seemed to have was not entirely negative. While there were indeed some

negative side effects, which will be examined in due time, written language was monumentally helpful in getting civilizations to where they are today.

With written language, there could now be a free exchange of ideas and information; it was no longer limited to the speaker and those present to hear them speak. Something could be written down and revisited whenever one pleased; it could be carried by a courier to the far corners of the domain in which it was written. Writing allowed for the formation of strict rules and laws as well as medical and agricultural procedures. Information could be preserved in its original state and not risk being degraded or misconstrued as it was passed from person to person. So long as one had the knowledge of how to read and write, there were no limits to the wealth of knowledge that one could gain and share through the written medium. However, it also created a divergence between the classes, because it was typically only the wealthy and educated (historically, males) that could learn how to perform these skills. It would be years before literary know-how would spread and be shared with those not in the upper class, although a high illiteracy rate still exists in many parts of the impoverished world today. Regardless, the new availability of information was monumental in human civilizations and development.

It is thanks to this written medium that we have the advanced medicine, agriculture, and technology that exists today. Through the use of these newly formulated documentations of thoughts and ideas, a new means of transferring information appeared. When discussing the historical roots of our ecological system, Lynn White, Jr. attributes the distinctive Western tradition of science to a massive movement of translation of Arabic and Greek scientific works into Latin during the late 11th century; the entire corpus of Greek and Muslim science was now available to be read and criticized by European universities (1967). The criticisms in turn led to new observations, speculations, and helped develop new methodologies and procedures that could be used in the scientific process. However, this use of a new written medium and the ease with which information could now be transferred among cultures was not

entirely beneficial. White, Jr. claims that along with the new observations and speculations, the availability of translated scientific documents to the Europeans also led to “an increasing distrust of ancient authorities” (1967).

As both European science and religion continued to expand and gain influence, there was a fundamental shift in our relationship with the natural world. These two branches of thought and inquiry, science and religion, ultimately led to the ecological crisis that we are now experiencing. There was no longer a healthy, reciprocal bond between humans and nature because we were less in touch with the forces that helped make up our sensorial experiences of the world. The phenomena are always taking place and it is impossible to exist independently of them, but the changes in our lifestyle and value system made it easier to forget these animate forces. Lynn White Jr. credits the extirpation of pagan animism to the sometimes forcible expansion of the classical theological tradition characteristic of Judeo-Christian religions. There were no longer “guardian spirits” inherent in each natural phenomenon, and there was no need to commune or interact with the entities present in the rivers, or the individual trees and hills in a forest. Without this relationship, “Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects,” playing a large role in the development of our ecologic crisis, since our human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny (White, Jr. 1967).

The Judeo-Christian story of humankind’s creation has been particularly influential. All things -- light and dark, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants and animals -- were created through the work of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God. This God also created Adam and Eve, the first humans, and it was Adam who was responsible for naming all of the plants and fish and birds and mammals that God had created. Through this story, our unequivocal dominance was established; all of

existence was planned explicitly for humankind, and no item in the physical creation had a purpose save to serve us (White, Jr. 1967).

Just as our lifestyle influences our vocabulary, the type of language we employ can affect our mindset and way of life. Lynn White, Jr. points out that the word *ecology* did not appear in the English language until 1873, most likely in response to the lifestyle changes inspired by the Baconian creed that “scientific knowledge means technological power over nature” (1967). Just as new words are developed in response to our values and opinions, the words that we consistently use can shape the beliefs that we have. The language used in the Genesis story of creation elevates humans to a place above nature, where we are no longer a part of the interconnected fabric of reality, and instead exist independently of the natural forces at play. The idea of dominion has never been as pervasive as it has been when employed by the Christian faith. The forced expansion of Christian ideology spread this language of anthropocentric superiority to millions of people and engrained these ideas and meanings in their minds for generations to come. For a time, scientific inquiries and technological developments were made almost exclusively in the name of God, forcing nature to succumb to our needs in a detrimental perversion of the phenomenological description of life and distracting us from the fully immersive and participatory experience of being.

Even early on in its inception, the written medium had already begun to separate humans from their expression. The individual was no longer synonymous with the thoughts, which require expression to complete. Whereas the expression of a thought completed it and gave it meaning in that singular specific context, expressions in a written medium could persevere through a period of time, and in doing so, were available to be altered or erased by someone other than the author and lose the original meaning. Words became less special; they lost their value as instruments of expression. Language, in one sense, becomes less of an act of expression and instead becomes a highly specified code, a tool for

representing actual things and events in the perceived world without any internal connection to ourselves (Abram 1996). It is now easily detachable from the perspectival existence of human beings and the natural world, and Abrams says that Merleau-Ponty claimed that this is only possible when meaning has become impoverished, “when the fresh creation of meaning has become a rare occurrence, [in] a time when people commonly speak in a conventional, ready-made ways” (1996).

There is no easy solution to the predicament we find ourselves currently in. There is nothing that we can do now that can instantaneously reverse decades of abuse and mistreatment of the natural world or revamp the vocabulary that has persisted throughout the generations. But we can begin to take steps in the right direction. We require an awakening, some sort of catalyst that will inspire a rethinking of our currently held values. We need to re-evaluate the way that we see ourselves and our place within the world, and this reflection will come to manifest itself in the ways that we speak and in the ways that we think. A new conception, or rather, a re-conception, of our language will help us to modify our behavior so we can return to an involved, reciprocal relationship with nature.

We cannot allow ourselves to be swindled by the appeal of scientific inquiry and the quest for purely objective answers. They do not exist, because there is no objective existence of anything. Each living entity and inanimate object is connected in the world of perception and is actively involved in the experience of any sensing subject. If we realize that we do not exist independently, as if we were separate marbles occasionally colliding in a jar, we can see that the relationship we currently have established with nature and the animate others around us is harmful to our own well-being, as well as theirs.

Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty worked to explain the nature of our perception -- the highly involved, inescapable, bodied experience that precedes all thought and conceptualization. We are continuously “in the world,” and we form relationships with all that we perceive and experience. The

creation and spread of written languages helped lead to great scientific and technological advancements over time, but it simultaneously worked to frightfully estrange us from our direct human experience (Abram 1996). It made it easier for people to forget their place in the natural world; it was easier to ignore the close ties and interactions that we have with things that are participating in our living, bodied experience. A rift was slowly formed between human beings and nature. It was no longer a harmonious co-existence. Humans came to see themselves as existing separately from nature, superior to it. Nature no longer had any direct involvement with us; it existed solely to serve our own needs. In order to rectify this shift in values, a reconceptualization, or a recollection, is necessary; we must remember our true place in the world and our relationship to everything around us. We must recognize that we do not exist in isolation, and we depend upon the world, upon objects both animate and inanimate, to continue our existence.

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