

## Landscapes devoid of meaning?

### A reply to Note

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*Even though artists and philosophers sometimes succeed in finding words for the meaning that places can have for us, we can never fully identify the meaning that places have for us. Nicole Note is right in arguing (using the work of Arnold Burms) that the ineffable plays a key role in the meaningful relations we have with the world, and that the experience of meaning can only emerge if there is a real risk that it fails to appear. Therefore, meaning cannot be 'produced'. I have argued, however, that we can be confronted with a far more radical loss of meaning when most at first meaningful interpretations of place turn out to be consciously produced by marketeers and lobbyists. Yet, even this very feeling of estrangement can lead us to a sensitivity for the otherness of nature as a transcendental source of meaning.*

Let me begin by thanking Nicole Note for her insightful comments on my paper on ecological restoration, place attachment, and non-places (Drenthen 2009a). I believe that Arnold Burms' work on the concept of meaningfulness can indeed help give a clearer idea of the issues at stake in a hermeneutic landscape ethics. I will first clarify some of my basic assumptions, and then discuss what I believe is at the heart of the matter.

Starting point of my paper was the contention that our relationships with the landscapes we inhabit are thoroughly and inevitably mediated through interpretation. Landscape interpretations often refer to particular 'objective' features of a landscape (a hill, a river, a wooded bank) and help put these in a broader perspective. 'Reading' a landscape can 'semiotically' connect particular 'legible' features in a landscape within a broader interpretative framework, for instance, by recognizing that certain ridges and gullies can be understood as witnesses of a particular geological history. But landscape interpretations can also involve landscape features that are less palpable: a place can be welcoming, or inhospitable, it can be bright or bleak, mesmerizing or intimidating, etcetera. Often these features are not so much 'objective' as they are relational. Our interpretations can bring together the features of a place in such a way, that they convey meaning. In that case, landscapes can tell a story – a story that expresses the meaning that a particular landscapes can have for us, and that connects the story about the land with the story about us. It is important to note that the meanings which get expressed in certain interpretations are not already there, merely waiting to be discovered.

Meanings do not exist objectively, independent of our understanding. They do not exist apart from or outside of our interpretations – rather, it is through our interpretation that landscapes can show themselves meaningful. Yet, meaning that come to the fore in our interpretations of landscapes should neither be understood as mere ‘subjective’ projections onto an ‘objective’ reality that in itself would lack meaning. Rather, meaning finds itself in the in between between object and subject: in our understanding of the world. Landscape interpretations are not merely the *expression* of meanings that certain landscapes have for us, hermeneuticists stress that interpretation always demands actively appropriation; meaning only comes into being through the interplay between our understanding of the world and the world that presents itself to us as worthwhile understanding (Drenthen 2011).

Philosophical hermeneutics claims that the quest for understanding is a fundamental characteristic of human existence, and stresses that we are always already situated in a history articulated in linguistic tradition. Understanding always includes self-understanding, indeed self encounter. We always take ourselves along whenever we understand. Although hermeneutics focuses on the significance of written texts, its scope is more general and includes all those elements in the world that somehow convey meaning. According to hermeneutics, the world we live in is an always already interpreted world. Rather than trying to liberate our understanding from preconceptions, hermeneutics stresses that preconceptions should be considered almost like transcendental ‘conditions of understanding’. We are a part of the tradition in which certain things can present themselves to us as being significant and meaningful, but understanding is not just reproductive but always also a productive activity. Understanding is less like grasping a content, a *noetic* meaning, and more like engaging in a dialogue — the “dialogue that we are”, says Gadamer (Gadamer 1975: 340). Understanding is aimed at an expanding horizon of meaning, what Gadamer refers to as ‘the fusion of horizons’. Through interpretation we come to understand the meaning of what at first appears alien, and participate in the production of a richer, more encompassing context of meaning — and by doing so we gain a better and more profound understanding not only of the ‘text’ but also of ourselves.

A hermeneutic approach to the human relation to the environment will depart from the idea that human environments are always already interpreted, and that our understandings of and encounters with environments are informed and moulded by pre-existing narratives — individual and collective, factual and fictional accounts of (encounters with) landscapes and of memories thereof. Understanding the meaning of a landscape is a never ending process, not just because we constantly discover new means of ‘extracting information’ from a text, but also, and more importantly, because the meaning a landscape conveys is part of an ongoing conversation about who ‘we’ are and what the world is to ‘us’. Hermeneuticists acknowledge that landscapes can be ‘read’ in

multiple ways, and that the moral narratives about the meaning of the environment which are based upon these readings often help to deal with the pull of competing and often incommensurable environmental values (cf. O'Neill, Holland & Light 2008).

A hermeneutic approach to landscape conflicts will start by articulating the ethical experiences that underlie the different interpretations of landscape, following the basic hermeneutic rule that one should “reconstruct the question to which the transmitted text is the answer” (Gadamer 1975: 355). It will then examine how the acknowledgment of the interpretative nature of our understanding of the environment and the re-articulation of the normative motives in hermeneutic terms can help further the ethical debate.

The purpose of my paper was – conversely – to understand actual ethical discussions about the significance of specific ecological restoration projects in the Netherlands. I believe environmental ethicists should try to further moral debates on environmental issues by deepening our collective understanding of the moral issues at stake in societal debates; the best way to do so is to help articulate the moral experiences underneath certain positions within these societal debates, and explicate the landscape interpretations at work in these debates. In my article I tried to articulate at least three moral discourses that appear to play a role in the actual moral debate about ecological restoration in the Netherlands, show which moral experiences are being expressed in them. Showing what tensions arise when the different moral perspectives confront each other, can help explicate the moral problems at stake in these debates.

In her comment, Nicole Note assumes that in my paper the concept of ‘estrangement’ has the same meaning as term ‘wildness’ in my earlier work, but this assumption is, I’m afraid, really based on a misunderstanding. In fact, I use the term in a far less systematic manner than Note appears to think. Like many other terms used in my paper, the term estrangement is not primarily meant as theoretical concept.<sup>1</sup> This may be one reason why Note regards my concept estrangement as confusing and ambivalent. But there may be another reason as well, as I will show.

Note is right in pointing out, that in my previous work on wilderness ethics (e.g. Drenthen 2005), I used the term ‘wildness’ to refer to that which defies appropriation. I have argued that there is a clear ambiguity and paradox in any form of environmental ethics that attempts to articulate the significance of that which lies beyond the all-too-human, because in order to do so, we need to appropriate the world in interpretations. Although the word ‘wilderness’ refers to that part of the world that cannot be fully appropriated, and wildness to that aspect of reality that

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<sup>1</sup> Rather, I propose the term for pragmatic reasons, for it might help the understanding of participants in the debate.

escapes appropriation, as a moral concept wildness still has to be fitted into words if we want to express the moral significance of the unappropriable otherness of the world into the moral debate. Earlier, I have argued that although we can define wilderness as that which is not culture, this formal definition does not signify the *meaning* of wildness (Drenthen 2005). As a moral concept, wildness plays a role *within* culture. The meaning of wildness, however, ultimately remains transcendent (cf. Clingerman 2010); the concept of wildness is merely an attempt to ‘capture’ the meaning of that which presents itself to us as somehow morally meaningful. Nevertheless, the notion of wildness as a critical border concept enables us to distinguish between appropriations in which nature is being *reduced* to a particular interpretation, and those interpretations that acknowledge something beyond.

Indeed I agree with Note that *total* appropriation – that is: the complete identification of that which presents itself as meaningful to us – would render the experience meaningless. As soon as our experience of meaning is somehow guaranteed, it loses its meaning altogether. I believe that this uncertainty is at the core of many attempts to encounter wilderness in border experiences.<sup>2</sup> But a similar transcendental meaning is at play in our moral relation with cultural landscapes as well. Note has shown the role of the ineffable in the first two perspectives on the legible landscape that I discussed in my paper — first, the cultural historical reading, and, second, the attempt to reground our reading of the landscape in an older, deeper pre-human history. In both discourses, the same element of transcendence can be discerned as discussed in my earlier work on wilderness. Indeed: the historical landscape has a deeper significance for those who feel at home in these places which is dependent on the legible features, but cannot be identified with these very features. I agree that the meanings of these landscape depends on a moment ‘beyond’ that defies appropriation. Yet, here, I again would also stress that the meaning of this ineffable ‘beyond’ which presents itself as meaningful can only be expressed as such as soon as we *do* attempt to appropriate this meaning. That is, we need to actively engage with that which conveys itself to us as being meaningful, and find words for that which somehow appeals to us. This paradox does not have to be a problem, though. It may be that we cannot ‘grab’ and identify the meaning of the ineffable in conceptual terms, but poets and artists show that sometimes we express the meaning of a place without losing its otherness.

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<sup>2</sup> In my paper about wildness in movies, I discuss how sought encounters with wildness seem to lose their meaning once the encounter with the wild is ensured. That is why certain wilderness seekers refuse to take along a map or a rifle. Only by taking the risk of losing it, the confrontation with the wild receives a deeper meaning. Cf. Drenthen 2009b.

In my discussion of the third discourse about non-places, however, I am addressing a different point. The term estrangement was not meant to refer to the ineffable moment that I earlier discussed in terms of wildness. Rather, it was meant to challenge the first two perspectives and confront the possibility of a radical loss of meaning (which is also a topic in the work of Burms).

Note points out that meaning has a 'transcendental' character: we can only experience meaning in those instances or occasions, in which we risk losing it altogether (cf. Burms & De Dijn 1986). There is no such thing as assured meaning. According to Burms, meaningfulness can only exist when there is a real risk of meaning loss. If your loved one is saying that he or she loves you, this will only have real meaning and significance to you if at that very same moment there is a real possibility that this person would say otherwise. As soon as we feel that the other has no other choice than to love us, or merely says it habitually, then this very statement of love loses much of its meaning. According to Burms, the possibility of *meaning loss* is constitutive for the very existence of meaning itself.

The dialectic between meaning and loss of meaning as discussed by Note only plays a role within a relationship that is already infused with meanings. Underneath Burms' discussion of meaning is the anthropological assumption that human beings have a fundamental desire for meaning and recognition, which cannot be reduced to the similarly fundamental human desires for knowledge and for control. It is because I am already longing for meaning in my relation with others, that the dialectic of meaning and meaning loss can come into play. In order for a place to have special meaning and significance, we need already be connected to that place in one way or another. This is even true in those cases when places cease to be meaningful, for instance when we discover that a familiar and beloved place been drastically renovated and we do no longer feel the connection we felt earlier. But this experience of loss of meaning still presupposes a sense of connectedness: we still care about the loss of meaning.

The problem that I'm addressing with the term 'estrangement', however, differs from this possible loss of meaning and refers to the possibility of a far more radical loss of meaning and rootlessness. I used the term estrangement in order to challenge us to confront the possibility that we have no longer any deeply meaningful relations with the world: what would such a bleak view mean for our ethical relation to landscapes? The term estrangement was, in other words, meant to recall the disquieting fact that many people today no longer appear to feel a meaningful connection with the particular landscapes they find themselves in. What if most meanings that connect us to the land on second thought turn out to be nothing more than social constructs, artefacts and fabrication, sold to us by tourist agencies, city marketeers and neotraditionalists? What if both the traditional and the regrouping interpretation of the meaning of landscapes presuppose a form of place attachment (or

a longing for it) that has become problematic in our age? What if we have to admit that landscapes no longer ‘talk’ to us, but instead we are merely talking to ourselves?

According to Friedrich Nietzsche, we contemporaries are deeply aware (or at least, could be and therefore should be) that all our cultural images and interpretations are deeply historically contingent. We “hybrid Europeans” (Nietzsche 1886, section 223) have at our disposal several moralities, articles of faith, tastes in art, and religion handed over to us in history. Modern man suffers from “historic disease”; he is like someone who stands before his pantry, oversees a “warehouse of costumes”, but notices that none of these costumes fit him properly, and therefore keeps changing them. According to Nietzsche, we postmodern pluralists hope to gain a sense of freedom from constantly changing costumes, but we are no longer able to tie ourselves down to any particular interpretation of the world. We may long for a ‘wildness’ beyond the contingency of cultural appropriations, but each particular interpretation with which to express this wild meaning in the world will be just another contingent way of looking. Much of Nietzsches work can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with this irretrievable loss of ground.

If the contemporary loss of connectedness to landscape and places relates to what Nietzsche is saying, than our rootlessness is beyond easy repair. If contemporary culture is indeed unable to commit itself any longer to any particular cultural interpretation of the world, as I suggested, than this means we can only make sense of our relation to landscapes by first accepting this bleakness of the way the world appears to us. If Note and Burms are right that true meaning only lies in (the beyond of) a particular interpretation of the world, than acknowledging that traditional articulations no longer adequately express what the world means to us, could very well be the only way out. Engaging in this new interpretation of the meaning world, despite it being a very bleak one, a way to find anew a meaning that lies beyond our own contingent image of the world. In that case, accepting that we postmodern cosmopolitans are detached strangers, could be a first step to becoming open again for those meanings in the world that transcend our all-too-human views of the world.

When we confront ‘the silence of nature’, we become aware of the futility of our all-to-human attempts to invest meaning in the world. If all our interpretations fail with respect to nature itself, it can be precisely this moment of estrangement in which our longing for meaning shows itself, and the sense of estrangement itself can even become a new source of meaning. The desire for meaning always involves a desire for a kind of transcendence, and transcendence can even show itself in absolute negativity: in the negation of the all-too-human, nature can show itself as a radical

transcendence.<sup>3</sup> Even radical loss of meaning can become a source of fascination for nature as the otherness beyond our all-too-human world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It is this form of negative transcendence, that historically has been worked out in negative theology. Cf. Bulhof & Ten Kate 2000.

<sup>4</sup> I wish to thank Glenn Deliège for his valuable comments and suggestions.