

# ECOLOGICAL ETHICS: Language, Religion, and the Problem of the Real

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**Abstract:** Word, whether it is known as *logos* or *Vak*, has been assumed by many religious traditions as at once the source and the agency unifying God, the human, and the world. Yet, the philosophical history that reached a high point with poststructuralism has come to view human language as separate from other realms jeopardising the sense of unity among these spheres. An integral vision involving everyone is crucial for ecological ethics and a sustainable universe. Human attitude to the non-human realm, exploitative or benevolent, is predicated on the way they textualise the world. Such a textualising enterprise broadly has taken either the representationalist or the dissociative trajectories. Both the approaches fall short in terms of the ecological ethics geared to a sustainable world. Studies in cognitive linguistics, the philosophical approach taken by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of language and ecological approaches seem to converge on an integral vision which is very close to the primaevial religious vision. Such a vision is germane to a sustainable eco-centred life, as much as it offers theoretical rigour for engaging the non-human sphere.

**Keywords:** Cognitive Linguistics, Ecocriticism, Embeddedness, Merleau-Ponty, Non-human Realm, Religion, Poststructuralism.

## 1. Introduction

The Enlightenment dream that has viewed the human being as the triumphant hero of history now stands discredited during postmodernity. And humanity finally is slowly waking up to the dire consequences of the illusion that human beings can get on in

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the world by neglecting the non-human sphere. However, despite the all too familiar platitudes about an inclusive vision, the non-human sphere is far from getting its due, and it seems the situation is worsening by the day. If anything, warnings have not been sparse. Many agencies, with the UN at the forefront, have repeatedly issued cautionary notes regarding the dire state of things in store for the world. The UN warns, for instance, in the paper entitled "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" that if the humanity goes this way, "The survival of many societies, and of the biological support systems of the planet, is at risk" (Paragraph no. 14).

Notably, a group of scientists came up with a second (after the first one twenty-five years before in 1992) cautionary note in a document in 2017 entitled "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice," which "is the most scientists to ever co-sign and formally support a published journal article" (Ripple 1028) signed by more than 15,000 scientists from all ends of the Earth. The document invites our attention to the stark reality of our precarious life, as it stresses that today the question before the world is not so much about prosperity as survival. The scientists have expressed anguish that "humans were on a collision course with the natural world." and are concerned about the "current, impending, or potential damage on planet Earth" (Ripple 1026). They say that "we have unleashed a mass extinction event, the sixth in roughly 540 million years, wherein many current life forms could be annihilated or at least committed to extinction by the end of this century" (Ripple 1026). Undoubtedly, centuries of 'human progress' resulted only in a crash landing for humanity as it committed a blunder in considering the non-human as dispensable. Gifford Pinchot, often described as the father of American Conservation, in what has now become a classic "The Foundations of Prosperity," emphasises that we have gone wrong in history and hence the imperative is a change of attitude to nature. Our disaster was "the creation of an absolutely false point of view" and therefore, "we must change our point of view" (741) for a sustainable world.

It may be seen that such a dire state is, by and large, traceable to the neglect of the rich linguistic legacy of an integral vision bequeathed to humanity through religious language, which got severely dented in history due to the way we came to textualise the phenomenal world. As language forms the crucial link between human beings and the world, one's view of the way language is related to the phenomenal world would ultimately determine the shape of one's ethics towards the non-human kingdom. Language has been conceived broadly in two ways: the representationism assumed by the philological approaches and the dissociativism adopted by structuralist and poststructuralist approaches. As philological approaches stress the absolute power of representation in a linguistic event, it assumes that language is a reliable medium and is able to reflect the world of phenomena faithfully and exactly. The structuralist and poststructuralist philosophies, on the other hand, especially during the modern period and later, have held that language cannot communicate properly because of the arbitrariness characterising the linkage between language and the world of phenomena.

This study assumes that both these approaches fall short in terms of a sustainable ecological ethics. For, while language as representation hides the violence of reduction of the non-human, language conceived as a separate entity drives a wedge between the human and the non-human realms. Accordingly, both approaches in the human textualising history, namely, language as representation and language as separate from the world, turned out to be oppressive to the non-human sphere. Consequently, the searchlight is still turned to what is described as the Real, a realm of transcendence that cannot be textualised. The problem of the Real seeks primarily to address the shape of the realm beyond textuality with a particular stress on the nature of the non-human realm. A serious attempt to secure an insight into such a realm is necessitated particularly by the fact that ethical concerns have exclusively been predicated on a textualised world.

While it is a commonplace that one's attitude to language ultimately determines the shape of one's relationship to the non-human world, this paper assumes that the ecological crisis that is

looming large primarily springs from disregarding the richly divine nature of language. Further, this study may be viewed as a call to a return to the linguistic legacy that unified the sacred and the secular in its original impulse. Significantly, the researches in cognitive linguistics, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and ecological approaches seem to lap over the rich legacy of the primaeval religious language.

## **2. Poststructuralism and Ecocriticism**

The naivety of the representationalist view of language is believed to have been laid bare by Ferdinand de Saussure's synchronic approach to the study of language by demonstrating the separation between the signifier and the signified, or in other words, between language and the thing. The divergence that Saussurean stress on signifier-signified arbitrary linkage set in motion proved itself to be far-reaching, especially in the phase of poststructuralist thought that came to view human language as a separate entity. And humanity, it seems, is struggling to recover from it. Though the notion of the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified was an idea dating back to antiquity, the stress that Saussure gave on it had a profound impact on the later thinking. Saussure famously said: "Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system" (120). Poststructuralist idea of the relationship between signifier and signified is generally believed to have been predicated largely on Saussurean theory regarding the arbitrary linkage of signifier and signified.

The poststructuralist theories stressed the textuality of the Real, that is, the real as knowable only to the extent it is symbolised textually. The poststructuralist position that came to view nature as nothing more than a social/linguistic construct had evidently far-reaching consequences, not the least of which was that it came in handy as a theoretical justification for wanton exploitation of nature. However, one cannot fail to note the paradox related to the convergence and departures in the linkage between poststructuralism and ecocriticism. Indeed, ecocriticism may be

viewed as at once a reaction against, and a continuation of, the theoretical processes initiated by structuralism and poststructuralism. It is a continuation because poststructuralism and structuralism, like ecocriticism, were anti-humanist and refused to place human beings at the centre of the scheme of things. Both critique the traditional anthropocentric view of life. Ecocriticism is a reaction in the sense that, by rejecting the over dominance of the signifier, that is, in its refusal to view the world as a textual construct, ecocriticism seeks to restore the signified to its rightful place. Thus, even as the poststructuralist denial of essences ended up as a clarion call to ecocriticism, ecocriticism problematised the Real still further in its project to capture the Real.

Interestingly enough, ecocriticism may also be viewed as a completion of the poststructuralist project. If poststructuralism critiqued the Cartesian dualism that held sway during the Enlightenment (with its privileging of mind over matter/body/nature), ecocriticism radically problematises the relationship between the human self that supposedly stands above and separate from nature and the self that is indwelling in it. Ecocriticism, thanks to its ambitious scope of viewing textuality as embedded in a nature that is preceding and exceeding, seeks to stress an eco-centric universe, though.

It is interesting to recall how structuralism afforded an easy theoretical framework for the suppression of the non-human with the construction of an endless series of binaries: culture vs nature, reason vs nature, mind vs natural or physical body, master vs natural slave, reason vs natural impulsive physical nature, rationality vs animality of nature, reason vs natural emotion, spirit vs nature, freedom vs natural necessity or determinism, human vs non-human nature, civilised vs primitive nature, cultural production vs natural reproduction, individual vs object of nature, self vs other, and so on. Even as the poststructuralist project aimed at subversion of such binarism, ecocriticism points out how the selfsame masculine hierarchical view of nature as inferior remained in place and became ever more vigorous in its support for the exploitation of nature. However, on the one hand, ecocritics feel that even as the poststructuralist rejection of totalitarian thinking

and grand narratives attempted to liberate the individual who was oppressed in terms of gender, class, and race, it has paradoxically led to greater exploitation of the environment. On the other hand, ecocritics are far from concurring with the anti-essentialist position taken by poststructuralist theories. For, ecocritics uphold a nature beyond textuality with prior essence and intrinsic value. They call for a return to such an essence of nature. Ecocritics draw our attention to the way the utter disregard for the Real has imperilled all earthly life. The privileging of the signifier, according to ecocritics, has been the result of the binaristic and hierarchised approach to life. Such philosophies, by and large, have ended up subordinating nature to the 'master' human being.

### 3. Integral Linguistic Vision of Religion

Religious thought, in general, has presented language and life as coeval and inseparable. It may be recalled that it is word, whether it is known as *Vak*, *Om*, *logos*, or any other, that is identified as the source of phenomena in major religious and philosophical traditions. For instance, one reads in the *Rig Veda*: "When *Vāk*, the queen, the gladdener of the gods, sits down (in the sacrifice) uttering things not to be understood, she milks water and food for the four quarters (of the earth); whither now is her best portion gone?" (VIII.100.10), or "The gods produced the goddess *Vāk*; her do animals of every kind utter; may she, *Vāk*, the all-gladdening cow, yielding meat and drink, come to us, worthily praised" (VIII.100.11). One encounters many similar references: "The divine cow, who herself utters, speech and gives speech to others, who comes attended by every kind of utterance, who helps me for my worship of the gods-- it is only the fool who abandons her" (VIII.101.16). When the word manifests as *Om*, it is still supreme. *Om* is *akṣhara*, or the imperishable Brahman: "OM! This Imperishable Word is the whole of this visible universe. . . . What has become, what is becoming, what will become – verily, all of this is OM" (*Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* 1). "Om̐ is both Brahman and the cosmos" (*Taittirīya* 1.8.1–2).

In the Bible, it is the divine Word or *logos*, conceived in all its polysemic plurality, that triggers creation: "And God said, 'Let

there be light' and there was light" (Genesis 1.3). "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1.1). Needless to add that the identification of God with his Word accords divinity a local habitation. Significantly, the Biblical creation is, by and large, a linguistic naming process by God, and which is duly handed over to Adam (Genesis 2. 19). One must imagine that the divine language shared with human beings is a precious legacy that carries the primordial polyphony and rich resonance. In this sense, the creative and divine legacy that language has been endowed with in its origin is a cohesive tool cementing God, the human, and the non-human in most religious traditions. Just as "the harmony of the cosmos can be ascribed to an immanent logos" (Edwards 146), "in the beginning, *Om* is supposed to have been the first vibratory sound that emanated as the seed of creation"(Krishnananda 16). "With *Om*, Brahma created this cosmos"( Krishnananda 23). "And when we chant *Om*, we also try to create within ourselves a sympathetic vibration, a vibration which has a sympathy with the cosmic vibration, so that, for the time being, we are in tune with the cosmos" (Krishnananda 23).

*Vak* or *Om*, the Upaniṣadic cosmic sound and the primal sound of creation in Hinduism, also finds resonance in Buddhism and Jainism. Similar to that of the Judeo-Christian world, where logos stands for divine creative power and is the intermediary between God and the cosmos, binding the two together, logos is a key term in ancient Egyptian tradition too. Logos stood for divine reason in ancient Greek thought, especially in Heraclitus and later Stoics. The Word spans a wide theological spectrum in many religious traditions and an analysis of the voluminous literature dealing with the exegesis of the richly nuanced polysemy of *Vak* or logos, rewarding as they are, is beyond the scope of this paper. The study focuses only on the logocentric metaphysics and its profound bearing on ecology, an interface that has been rather culpably ignored but which can function as a theoretically sound framework for the reciprocity binding God, human beings and phenomena through language in its general sense.

### 3. 1. Cognitive Linguistics

If the deeply entrenched representationalist view of language stood discredited at the hands of structuralism and poststructuralism, many studies in Cognitive Linguistics demonstrated the unsure foundations of both the representationalist view and the dissociative view. As the representationalist view assumes that language can comprehend and entirely account for the world, language ends up in this view as a vehicle for subjugation and control over the non-human. Cognitive linguistics holds that only a fallacious assumption that mental concepts are representations of the world of objects would lead to the conclusion that language is an expression of such concepts. New research in the cognitive field has shown that mental concepts are far from copies of the objects. It is an illusion to hold that we have faithful mental copies of objects: "The mind is thus not simply a 'mirror of nature,' and concepts are not merely 'internal representations of external reality'" (Lakoff 370). The objectivism informing the representationalist position is mechanical, and therefore, it is indefensible. We are easily taken in by the representationalist view because our ability to name phenomena is mistaken as sourced from mental objects. "What is important is that objectivist views can no longer be taken for granted as being obviously true and beyond question" (Lakoff 373).

Several studies in Cognitive Linguistics, locating themselves at various levels of the inter-involvement between the human and the non-human, offer guidance for an agreeable ecology-centred ethics that is predicated on the ecological embeddedness of language and subjectivity. It disregards the essentialist view of both language and subjectivity. For, "much of the structure we find in the social, epistemic, and conversational or speech-act domains is intimately related to parallel structure in our embodied (so-called physical) experience" (Johnson 63).

Language functions in ways other than through representation. One has to seriously engage with the view that as meaning is historical and contingent, it is far from a private affair, carried in watertight compartments by either the human or the non-human subject, but as engendered by their interaction in a variety of ways. Forgetting the crucial dimension of the ontology of human



language as a continuum of and as predicated on the non-human gives rise to a process of othering. Any linguistic event is metaphoric where imagination plays a defining role: "Imagination is central to human meaning and rationality (Johnson 172). Hence, one might say that "meaning is not situated solely in propositions; instead, it permeates our embodied, spatial, temporal, culturally formed, and value-laden understanding" (Johnson 172).

Cognitive Linguistics is predicated on the way human cognitive functions and language are deeply entrenched in our bodily engagement with the world. It is now almost an orthodoxy that our meaning-making processes are non-linguistically embedded because "the linguistic is grounded in the non-linguistic" [and] some of the ways we make meaning are ways we share with other animals" (Oliveira and Bittencourt 41-42). The problem of the Real, which, by and large, emerged from the view of human language as an isolated and independent entity, melts away at the realisation that the mind itself is constitutive of the embodied activity in the world. The whole issue of the problem of the Real might have had its roots in the mind-body opposition that needs to be rethought in terms of their continuity. For, one of the fundamental postulates of Cognitive Linguistics is that "the body does not terminate with the fleshy boundary of the skin. It extends out into its environment, so that the organism and environment are not independent, but rather interdependent aspects of the basic flow of bodily experience" (Oliveira and Bittencourt 23). Notably, the interdependence is so comprehensive in its genesis that it seems to cover the entire human faculty. The theorists in this area are committed to the idea that 'higher' cognitive functions arose from our bodily engagement with our world. "Both embodied cognition and cultural embedding figure in all facets of language structure. Moreover, they are closely intertwined, with no possibility of a neat separation" (Langacker 47).

On the other hand, the argument based on the arbitrariness of signs cannot go far because "language users do not invent language from scratch, but they receive it as part of their cultural environment . . . and that mental absorption may imply a partial reinvention of what is being reproduced" (Geeraerts 66).

Significantly, the findings in cognitive linguistics that stress the embeddedness of language in the body as well as in the non-human sphere seem to be coterminous with the nucleus of the ancient creative language of religion working itself out in evolutionary history.

### **3.2. Language as “Flesh of the World”**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, dwells at length on the danger when language is considered as separate from the world or when language is viewed exclusively in its denotative dimension, as both the approaches can completely cut the human away from the non-human sphere. Merleau-Ponty's work demonstrates the way human beings, thanks to their assumption of the world of phenomena as inert and mechanical, have come to look upon human language and the world of phenomena as two discrete and independent realms. Yet, the key takeaway, as Merleau-Ponty observes, from the Saussurean dictum that in language, there are only differences without positive terms is that language dissociated from its network of the relationship becomes dysfunctional: “What we have learned from Saussure is that, taken singly, signs do not signify anything, and that each one of them does not so much express a meaning as mark a divergence of meaning between itself and other signs” (Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 39. Cited in Abram 57).

Merleau-Ponty starts off with a warning to be cautious of a host of issues when a tradition is based on fallacious assumptions like objectivist fixities related to the external world. Western philosophy and psychology would love to take an objective world for granted as it rests on scientifically firm grounds, except that it is wrong to take the process for the product. The fundamental assumption of the object-subject divergence needs to be rethought, for “we do not establish ourselves in a universe of essences—on the contrary we ask that the distinction between the *that* and the *what*, between the essence and the conditions of existence, be reconsidered by referring to the experience of the world that precedes that distinction” (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, 27). In order to drive home the fact that language is essentially carnal, Merleau-

Ponty asserts that each perceptive event is a "reciprocal exchange" between the living body and the throbbing life around it. Each language event has to be viewed more as a working out of the complex processes of mutual interchange among many entities than as simple naming incidents.

Dualistic assumptions that seem so apparent and therefore taken for granted are not entirely oriented to the expression of the fundamental unity that characterises the interdependence of entities. Merleau-Ponty stresses the inadequacy of such a dualistic perspective and turns the spotlight on to the inter-involvement in a subject-object encounter:

What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them—but something to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look, things we could not dream of seeing "all naked" because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh" (*Visible* 131).

One has to be aware that a live body is a speaking entity. Rather than being inert, it is most responsive at the centre of its apparent passivity. There is a pulsating dynamism of existents shared by everyone so much that transformation and mutation rather than stasis or fixity would better account for the real life of things. Making sense of the entities in the world is far from labelling phenomena. Had there been clear a demarcation, as one is wont to take for granted, it would be a case of a simple and straightforward naming affair. Most rewardingly, an inquiry in this regard would take one to the mysteries of transcendence. Merleau-Ponty demonstrates how the process of perception itself is a complex interchange among the faculty, which looks not just like synaesthesia, but one of simultaneous inter-involvement of many faculties of an individual: "There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible;" (*Visible* 134).

Alternatively, such a vision can be a religiously inclusive one involving God, humans, and the non-human. For instance, Nandhikkara, citing Brueggemann says that "In the

Theanthropocosmic vision of the Bible the earth has human and divine dimensions and the humankind has earthly and divine dimensions and the divine has earthly and human dimensions" (398). Such a realm that integrates the world of the Divine, Human, Real, phenomena, and transcendence seems to be the essence of a theanthroposcopic perspective, especially as logos as the "wisdom of God" is at once both divine and human.

### **3.3. Mind-Body Continuum in Merleau-Ponty**

There is never a moment when the mind takes over everything; hence, the precedence accorded to the mind and its faculties may only be useful for analysis. Perhaps our stress on the mind-body dichotomy has done us in, and it is critical that the mind-body dichotomy should give way to mind-body continuum. The whole issue has its source in the traditional view of the body as an entity infused with a homuncular self that gets precedence over the container body. Such a trope for imagining the body, human or otherwise, is hardly warranted: "We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box" (*Visible* 138). And the challenge is thrown down to us: "Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?" (*Visible* 138). Indeed, the critique needs to be directed towards the fundamental illusion informing a perspective that considers the subject-object or the seer-seen distinction as part of the ontogenesis of the world.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is the device through which I mark myself in the world as much as others mark their presence through the body to me. It is, in fact, the locus and the tool with which one gets situated in the world. One is hardly a spirit, and a spirit is unable to connect itself to the universe (*Phenomenology*, 214). Hence, Abram summarises: "Thus, at the most primordial level of sensuous, bodily experience, we find ourselves in an expressive, gesturing landscape, in a world that speaks" (Abram 56).

### 3.4. A Return to the Original Embedded Experience as Presence

Merleau-Ponty stresses the necessity of a return to what he describes as the "perceptual faith," which might stand for the precognitive and prelinguistic first experience of the world. The return to the origin is a return to the original perception. Merleau-Ponty, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, stresses the inescapably carnal nature of human language because "there is not a word, not a form of behaviour which does not owe something to purely biological being—and which at the same time does not elude the simplicity of animal life" (220), so that language has its genesis in gestures which spontaneously express themselves before consciously choosing a linguistic expression.

A return to real experience would be to get back to the fundamental embeddedness that characterises one's encounter with the word:

. . . since perhaps the self and the non-self are like the obverse and the reverse and since perhaps our own experience is this turning round that installs us far indeed from "ourselves," in the other, in the things. Like the natural man, we situate ourselves in ourselves and in the things, in ourselves and in the other, at the point where, by a sort of chiasm, we become the others and we become world (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, 160).

As one comes back to the original perception, the first experience is that of presence, a crucial term, especially in the context of the poststructuralist thought that sets great store by concepts such as play and presence. Merleau-Ponty is hardly explicit regarding the religious dimension of the presence in his call for a return to the original impulse of language awakening presence. All the same, it is a perspective that is on a par with the spiritual dimension of the primal language that bound the divine, human and the non-human together: "Our first truth—which prejudices nothing and cannot be contested—will be that there is presence, that "something" is there, and that "someone" is there" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, 160)".

It is interesting to note how Merleau-Ponty revises the Saussurean statement regarding the way meaning is a matter of a network of differences and the absence of positive meaning in individual utterances. While Saussure did not refer to any bodily

embeddedness, Merleau-Ponty locates the differences in the carnal basis of language:

What Merleau-Ponty retains from Saussure is Saussure's notion of any language as an interdependent, weblike system of relations. But since our expressive, speaking bodies are for Merleau-Ponty necessary parts of this system—since the web of language is for him a carnal medium woven in the depths of our perceptual participation with the things and beings around us—Merleau-Ponty comes in his final writings to affirm that it is first the sensuous, perceptual world that is relational and weblike in character. . . (Abram 58).

Martin Heidegger's oft-quoted remark, "language speaks us" (205) more than we speak language, which subsequently became seminal in poststructuralist thinking, apparently refers to a certain overdetermining feature that language possesses. Albeit in a different sense, it indicates the deep-seated and embedded character of the language. One might say that the great cohesive force of religious language in the form of logos, *Om* and so on, which was profoundly participatory in its origin, gradually fizzled out and has ceased to be animate or alive.

### **3.5. Signifying Systems of the Natural World**

The worst legacy of humanism has been the illusion about language as exclusively human human as well as overlooking the nonhuman-specific languages. The problem of the linguistic/social construction of the subject and the world is sought to be overcome by ecocritics by an appeal to the existence of a different 'natural' language. Gary Snyder argues that it is mistaken to assume that language is uniquely human and primarily a cultural manifestation for organising and civilising an otherwise 'chaotic' world. He says that language is biological, which turns cultural in the articulation of the 'wild.' Hence, ecocriticism seeks to question the way human language has constructed the world dualistically by suppressing or ignoring a 'different' language of nature. According to Snyder, the distinction between human language and the real is traceable to one's idea of the 'wild'. Snyder does not accept the general assumption of the wild as separate from the individual. For, a mind

that defies its own dictates is the most obvious prototype of the 'wild' that one carries around: "The workings of the human mind at its very richest reflect this self-organising wildness" (Snyder 174). Instead of viewing the wild as the other, it may be a surprising realisation that it is the 'wild' that constitutes us and is enclosed within us like an intimate domesticity. "Language is basically biological" (Snyder 178) since "consciousness, mind, imagination, and language are fundamentally wild. 'Wild' as in wild ecosystems, richly interconnected, interdependent, and incredibly complex. Diverse, ancient, and full of information" (Snyder 168).

It is also argued that whole ecosystems might be said to be sustained by complex networks of communication and exchange between species and non-biological elements of their environment. Hence, we need to look for definitive signifying systems alleged to be present in the natural world. Traditional societies were profoundly animistic in their outlook; hence, they stressed their interdependence arising out of the interchange of vital links with the non-human sphere. The aboriginal world recognised the signifying systems in the wind, soil, waterfalls, oceans, micro-organisms, birds, animals, and so on. The insistence on proof for such linkage was not required in a traditional society for obvious reasons.

Among its characteristics is the belief (1) that all the phenomenal world is alive in the sense of being inspirited—including humans, cultural artifacts, and natural entities, both biological and 'inert,' and (2) that not only is the non-human world alive, but it is filled with articulate subjects, able to communicate with humans (Manes 17-18).

Interestingly, one finds a number of contemporary studies identifying a common platform of the linguistic patterns across the biotic kingdom. Those studies that consider biological systems in their complex dynamics as languages in their own way broadly stress the evolutionary progress of a shared legacy from simple to more complex patterns. Such findings seem, more or less, to validate the vision of autochthonous societies.

Thus, although anthropocentric biases often lead us to concentrate on human communication, particularly language . . . animal models can help us understand how learning (and likely motivation) is involved in cognitive processing, imitation and communication. Acquisition processes for communication in non-humans and humans demonstrate striking parallels (Pepperberg and Sherman 385).

Many contemporary scientific approaches take a refreshingly broader and inclusive perspective to locate the language issue. Such studies warn about the fallacy of bypassing the dimension of the understructure of the entire language question.

The myriad forms of signifying systems coinhering in the universe are neither discrete by themselves nor *sui generis*. Indeed many studies refuse to set great store by the claim of the uniqueness of human language: “we would bet that humans share with other animals the core mechanisms for speech perception. More precisely, we inherited from animals a suite for perceptual mechanisms for listening to speech—ones that are quite general, and did not evolve for speech” (Hauser and Fitch 179). Hence, one is required to explore more and more and unravel the secrets that nature hides in the DNA structure to understand the mutual interchange of signals within the biotic sphere and even between the biotic and the non-biotic sphere.

#### **4. Ambiguities of Nature and the Ethical Question**

However, only a diehard optimist perhaps can believe that nature gives a definitive, univocal message of harmony. At worst, nature is strife based on the survival of the fittest, violence and unpredictability, and at best, nature is equivocal. The sentimental effusions of a diehard romantic may not command the requisite ontological validation. More research is necessary into the mysteries of the non-human world, and especially its reason, rationality, and culture. This might take one to transcendence. One recalls that for contemporary physics the universe is no more inert matter as waves of dynamic energy at the level of subatomic particles. Such a realisation, for sure, sets the stage for a return to



the original creative and dynamic divine energy of the religious language of logos or *Om*.

However, as human beings are not the only inhabitants of the world, ethical issues take centre stage. Ecocritics say that the question is not what is good for human beings but what is good for everyone. Such an ethic would say that a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends to do otherwise. Many apparently eco-critical texts bear a deep-seated humanist bias because the passage from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism is not easy. The defining moment for an ecology-centred ethics is when the world is accorded the status of 'flesh' as Merleau-Ponty would have it. When critics like Lawrence Buell propose the following key features, among others, in an eco-centred work, they are definitely on the same page with Merleau-Ponty, studies in cognitive linguistics, and above all, the primal creative Word of religion:

- i) The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
- ii) Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.
- iii. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the texts (7-8).

And here is the point of a seamless mutuality of the sacred and secular. If cognitive linguistics, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and ecocriticism seem to speak with one voice, they are only holding a candle to the original impulse of the divine Word.

## 5. Conclusion

Hence, instead of approaching the issue of the Real as emanating from the opposition between human language and the lack of the same in the non-human sphere, one should rather locate the entire language dynamics in the multitudinous aspects of its manifestation in both the human as well as the non-human realm in the evolutionary history of the universe gathering steam from the primordial impulse. The matter concerns at once the desirability as well as the possibility of objectifying nature. As

human beings are far too deeply inter-involved with the ecological sphere to stand apart and view it from a distance, one is up against a variation of the Heisenberg paradox. For, “there is no such thing as objectivity. We cannot eliminate ourselves from the picture. We are part of nature, and when we study nature there is no way around the fact that nature is studying itself” (Zukav 31). Crucially, one misses the essential continuity that holds up as the bedrock of life. For, language rather than being a human invention or an ability that happened to humans in one fell swoop, has been a slow and grinding legacy. “Languages were not the intellectual inventions of archaic schoolteachers, but are naturally evolved wild systems whose complexity eludes the descriptive attempts of the rational mind” (Snyder 174).

When human language is viewed as marking a continuum of, as against a break with, the evolutionary scheme, the non-human language ceases to be the other that it is assumed to be at present. The call to return to the original impulse of the incidence of language is a trope for a reawakening in order to partake in the creative energy of *logos* or *Vak*, which may be located at the interface of ecocentrism and logocentrism and the modern sciences. Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty's views, the studies in Cognitive Linguistics about language and eco-critical approaches on the one hand and the integral religious vision of language as the agent of creation on the other seem to be singing the same song. Additionally, an exegetical intervention in the religious texts that would ensure a more inclusive vision would be a significant step towards ecocentrism and sustainability. Such an approach would enable humanity to shift focus from textuality to inclusive ethics, which is a refreshing realisation that humanity would embrace with relief because the choice is now limited to either prosperity or extinction for all.

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