

Interactive comment on “Vollzug und Sprache Physischer Geographie und die Frage geographischen Takts” by B. Zahnen

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This is in many ways a fascinating manuscript. It offers a searching exploration of phenomenological aspects of the practice of physical geography from the perspective of a practicing physical geographer who has also become conversant in philosophy. The paper poses a rather ambitious challenge to physical geography to broaden its focus so as to become more reflectively aware of its own character and distinctiveness as a science, and in doing so, to enter into more serious discussions with human geographers about the meaning of materiality. The idiom of the argument is phenomenological, and the consistency the author seeks to maintain is likewise that of disciplined philosophical reflection starting from personal experience. The details of physical geographical research play hardly any direct role in the argument, instead being taken for granted

as a source of authority for the author in her reflections.

One of the major goals of the argument is to explicate the unacknowledged importance to physical geographic research of “geographical tact”. This is a certain, not fully definable, experience-based “feel” that allows physical geographers (and other earth scientists) to engage with their surroundings as embodied individuals in field situations in such a way that they are capable of distinguishing between what is important for their research and what is not. It is a process of the search for appropriate forms in which or as which to grasp one’s surroundings in the field. However, this search is not merely analytical in the sense of a focus on details but always at the same time a matter of holistic orientation, an ongoing attempt to achieve a sense that one has “gotten the overall picture” (ins Bild gekommen ist) (Zahnen 2011, 20). This getting the picture is then the condition of possibility of identifying the key, previously unnoticed details that will answer research questions.

But this process of exercising geographical tact is not merely a question of an active Subject developing an ever-finer sensitivity for a passive or inert Object; rather, the author seeks to argue that a form of “conversation with the Earth” takes place, an exchange not identical with intersubjective discussions between humans but also not so different from this model as we tend to assume. This argument requires some account of how it is that the material environment or elements of it “contribute” to such a conversation, and in the context of what kind of “conversational dynamics”. The author argues that such conversation is not so much “performative” as “evolutive”, animated by ongoing attempts to develop knowledge adequate to insights that encompass both the behaviour of objects as well as the activities of the researching subject (Zahnen 2011, 15).

This process can be described, so the author claims, as a form of “double hermeneutic”. Like the version of the double hermeneutic that refers to intersubjectivity, she asserts that in the context of “conversations with the Earth” there is likewise a “third term” connecting the two parties to conversation. This third term is identified as a “tra-

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gender Anspruch der Sache". This phrase does not translate easily into English, but an (admittedly awkward) approximation might be the "underlying requirements of the matter". The multi-levelled sense of the word "matter" in English is similar to that of "Sache" in German: in both cases it can mean inert material or thing as well as the question or issue at hand. "Requirements", on the other hand, fails to capture what the author wants to convey with "Anspruch", which is the key word here. While Anspruch could be translated with requirements, demand or claim, its root in German, -spruch, relates it to sprechen, to speak, and to Sprache, language. Thus the third term in the purported double hermeneutic is to be understood as a set of requirements or claims that speak to or through the relation between embodied researcher and material field surroundings. Anspruch also calls to mind in German the adjective anspruchsvoll, which means "demanding", "challenging", or, when referring to a person, "exacting", "having high expectations". Thus "this Anspruch der Sache is at the same time the claim of the – exacting - scientist as well as the claim of the – challenging – field area or natural formation (Naturgebilde)" (Zahnen 2011, 23).

It is worth dwelling on this phrase at length because it is crucial to get a sense here for how things or natural formations are purported to participate in this Anspruch der Sache and thus take part in such conversations. The author insists that what she has in mind here is not the same as the idea of active participation of things so central, for example, to Actor-Network Theory (Zahnen 2011, 9). This is promising, if true, as ANT indeed loses some credibility in the reduction of agency to behaviour that is the price it pays for widening the scope of possible agents. What is different about the approach taken in this paper? How do things speak with physical geographers?

"The inherently multi-layered and changeable [übergänglichen] natural formations clearly do not speak as we humans do. But they carry on a conversation in the sense that, in the process in which they first emerge for someone, they are anspruchsvoll in the twofold sense discussed earlier and thus always already point beyond themselves as well. Similarly, too, with reference to the phenomenon of conversation, Gadamer

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wants to bring to expression something more than an ontic process of communication between subjects in their respective subjectivity, namely, an event of being [Seins-geschehen] that exceeds the subjectivity of the subject and never fully frees itself from the sphere of the not-understood. Gadamer's famous sentence "Being that can be understood is language" is also to be understood in this way. Things, as well, natural formations of the Earth, too, can be language in this sense, to the extent that they have effects as media [medial wirken], that is, in a way that holds us in an opening relation to the sphere of something not understood, that is, makes it possible for us to get the overall picture [uns ein Ins-Bild-kommen ermöglicht]" (Zahnen 2011, 23-24).

I am not convinced that this admittedly very careful and sensitive argumentation resolves the problems that plague Actor Network Theory. The "third element" ultimately does not absolve things or natural formations of having to be portrayed in a way that suggests a sort of inherent "tailoring" to human epistemological needs. Thus, in the above passage, the account of natural formations as having "effects as media" begs the question of, and depends upon, the epistemological capabilities of the scientist on whom they have these effects, and implies a kind of underlying match between the two, an assumption that remains, at bottom, anthropocentric.

The latter parts of the paper seek to work out what is distinctive about physical geography as opposed to other Earth Sciences, and locates the distinctive difference in the "graphicity" [Graphizität] that links physical geography more than other Earth Sciences to the problem of representation. Here, too, as in the question of the tragenden Anspruch der Sache, the author argues that representation cannot simply be ascribed to scientific subjects but originates in the exchange between scientist and natural formations. To illustrate this, she refers to "the lived, living praxis of orientation in the landscape with the use of a map: here, too it is not possible clearly to establish whether the way in which the landscape represents itself in the process of this orientation comes originally from the cartographic representation or conversely [if] the cartographic representation is to be understood on the basis of orientation in the landscape" (Zahnen

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2011, 30).

What is clear in this passage, and throughout the paper, is the author's insistence that the lived, embodied experience of physical geographic research, in its inherent entanglement with unrepeatability and not fully graspable "events of being", is a better starting point for reflection on what physical geography is or could be than the sanitized, retrospective, scientific representations of physical geography as distanced, objective and non-personal. It is difficult to disagree with the author's claim that a physical geography which reflected more systematically on its activities from a phenomenological perspective would enrich its understanding of what it is doing. Such a shift in approach by growing numbers of physical geographers would also be welcomed for the avenues of serious discussion it would open up with human geographers. On the basis of this alone, the present paper is a valuable call to action.

At the same time, however, some of the paper's central ambitions exceed its capability to fulfil them. In particular, the idea of a "conversation with the Earth" requires more development before it can be persuasive as a characterization of physical geographic praxis. The question of the senses in which it is possible to conceive of things or natural formations as having a language that allows them to "speak to us" might best be further explored, for example, through recent discussions of the phenomenon of attentiveness (Aufmerksamkeit) (see for example Waldenfels 2004 on Auffälligkeit). Further exploration of issues of attentiveness and the dynamics of attention promise, among other things, to help clarify what the author of this paper terms "geographical tact", which, again, has to do centrally with the ability to recognize significant anomalies or features against a background of otherwise insignificant surroundings in the field.

In any case, this is a very interesting and bold attempt to shift the terms of debate. The fact that it cannot answer all of the questions it raises does not diminish its value as a provocative intervention. It is to be hoped that some other physical geographers are paying attention.

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Note: All translations from the German are by the reviewer.

References: Waldenfels, B. (2004): Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. Zahnen, B. (2011): Vollzug und Sprache Physischer Geographie und die Frage geographischen Takts, Social Geography Discussion 7, 1-37.

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