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**2024-02-28**

Oxford University Press

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/574140>

Ikonen, E, Keränen-Pantsu, R & Welz, C 2024, 'Imagining sustainable worlds : the potential of mythical stories in environmental education', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopedu/qhae021>

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# Imagining sustainable worlds: the potential of mythical stories in environmental education

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## ABSTRACT

Pedagogically speaking, how can we best transform a student's understanding of the environment? To move students to action, and to inspire sustainable lifestyles, environmental educators would do well to consider personal pedagogical approaches, as opposed to merely present scientific facts about climate change and species extinction. In this article, we present the power of myth as a compelling option. We expand on prevailing pedagogies of myth, such as Matthew Farrelly's approach, and argue that mythical stories taken from Nordic folk traditions, the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran can enhance environmental education by introducing multiple alternative ways of relating to nature, facilitating mutual teacher–student reflections, and by building more responsive relationships with fauna and flora. Building upon Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory, we contend that the process of imagining sustainable worlds is facilitated by engagement with mythical stories and that the counter-productive imposition of world-views on students is minimized through critical discussions of relevant learning materials.

**KEYWORDS:** environmental education, myth, transformative learning, imagination, sustainability, Paul Ricoeur, Matthew Farrelly

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the current 'climate catastrophe', there is widespread agreement that we must shed our ecologically harmful habits before it is too late. Yet information about climate change alone does not seem to have the power to change our lifestyles. We require deeper-level changes if we hope to radically transform our ways of relating to our environments (Laininen 2019). Indeed, there is a widespread desire to enact transformative environmental education, even though the meaning and use of the word

Received: July 19, 2022. Revised: June 28, 2023. Accepted: February 9, 2024

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‘transformative’ varies ([Stickney and Skilbeck 2020](#)). To impel people to action—and this is where environmental ethics and education coincide—the products of our imagination should ideally contain elements of joy about nature, its intrinsic value and its need for protection, yet also help us navigate in a world where we must use the resources of nature and balance between conflicting demands as well as deal with anxiety caused by not knowing for sure how effective our efforts are.

In his article ‘The Significance of Myth for Environmental Education’ ([2019](#)), educational philosopher Matthew Farrelly argues that a deep dive into myth holds special power as a pedagogy for environmental education (EE) by transforming our relationship to ‘nature’. As he informs us, engaging with myth invites students into mythopoetic worlds and undergirds transformative EE by developing human–environmental imagination to absorb the intrinsic value of all beings and create conditions for immersive experiences with nature. We find Farrelly’s initiative both novel and compelling. Yet, Farrelly offers a definition of myth that omits references to collective, archaic, and religious layers, thus excluding a large body of literature (see section 3 below). Furthermore, he takes special interest in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins as an example, yet despite Hopkins’ poetry being abundant with allusions to a broad assortment of world mythologies, Farrelly provides a secular reading of him. A secular approach such as Farrelly’s has many strengths. We will briefly discuss its appeal. However, there is more to myth than this. For this reason, we will ask what would happen if we conducted myth-aided EE with a different notion of myth, using stories containing mythical images and motifs from the Finno–Ugric, Judeo–Christian, and Islamic traditions. We consider our suggestions as expanding rather than excluding Farrelly’s approach. We wish to promote a multi-ontological approach to EE which embraces a variety of ontological beliefs.

We will first (in section 2) discuss imagination and ethical orientation by drawing on the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and contextualize myth within the ‘vast laboratory’ of literature ‘through which narrativity serves as a propaedeutic to ethics’ ([Ricoeur 1992](#): 115). Next, we will proceed to different definitions of myth (section 3). We will then discuss the special power of myth as presented by Farrelly (section 4) and argue that by incorporating the archaic and religious layers of myth, and the chains of memory embedded in different ontological frameworks (section 5), a broader range of imaginations can be achieved. After presenting mythical stories from different traditions that exemplify responsive relationships to flora and fauna (section 6), we will outline what transformative EE through myth could look like (section 7). Finally, we will summarize what it means to imagine sustainable worlds by transforming our very take on ‘the environment’ (section 8).

## 2. IMAGINATION AND ETHICAL ORIENTATION

What does it mean to imagine sustainable worlds? In what follows, we will examine and employ imagination as a means of ethical (re)orientation ([Welz 2018, 2019, 2022](#)). Imagination is ‘the ability to see possibilities’ beyond that which we can see with our eyes ([Grøn 2002](#): 28). Imagination not only (re)presents what is

absent, but also transforms it by embedding mental images in a broader context through continuous updating of the parameters framing them. The invisible is mediated both by mental images and by metaphors.

Here we are drawing on phenomenological accounts of imagination, which ‘mostly address the creative power of imagining as the capacity to become conscious of or conjure up’ objects and events that are not present or perceptually available, ‘transforming familiar things in innovative ways; and symbolically, analogically, or pictorially seeing something *as* something else’. These modes of imagining involve a ‘complex relation between actuality and possibility’ including ‘cognitive and poetic as well as social and political dimensions and implications’ (Jansen 2014).

Thus, ethical orientation via imagination is a meaning-giving hermeneutical process of understanding and interpreting, which not only concerns an individual alone (imagining that *X* is the case or what it is like to experience *Y*) but rather concerns situations in a world we (more or less) have in common. Imagining a sustainable world (or various versions of sustainable worlds) is, in this view, a temporally extended process of imagining us ‘doing, being, or experiencing something’ (Feagin 2014).

As such, imagination also lies at the heart of the work by Paul Ricoeur. In *La Métaphore vive* (1975), translated as *The Rule of Metaphor* (1978), Ricoeur emphasizes the iconic ‘power of metaphor to “set before the eyes”’ (2003: 34). Yet he goes on ‘to bracket this *non-verbal* kernel of imagination, that is, imagery understood in the quasi-visual, quasi-auditory, quasi-tactile, quasi-olfactory sense’; instead, he approaches productive (as opposed to reproductive) imagination ‘from the perspective of a semantic theory, that is to say on a verbal plane’ (2003: 235). Ricoeur then explores ‘the frontier between semantics and psychology’ where he also finds ‘the junction’ of the verbal and the nonverbal (2003: 236).

As Ricoeur informs us, our imaginative faculties are intimately entwined with the symbolic realms of communities and their myths. Expressions of these symbolic realms offer a playground for imagination. In an interview with Richard Kearney, Ricoeur convincingly claims: ‘Poetry and myth are not just nostalgia for some forgotten world. They constitute a disclosure of unprecedented worlds, an opening on to other possible worlds which transcend the established limits of our actual world’ (Ricoeur 1991: 489–90). Myths expand the horizon of our imagination when mentally picturing sustainable worlds which we ourselves would like to inhabit and which we would like to hand down to future generations. Myths are not necessarily naïve or false beliefs;<sup>1</sup> rather, they envision possibilities that are buried deep down in the well of the past and that can be actualized in the future. Therefore, mythical language has the capacity to open new worlds.

<sup>1</sup> However, when combined with ideology, myths *can* become dangerous, and that is the reason why Rudolf Bultmann and others developed a notion of ‘demythization’, which at the time also could serve as ‘a countermove against the new mythology of the Nazi regime’ (Karlsen 2021: 61 n.36). Ricoeur (2004: 332) describes the double function of demythization as (1) ‘demythologization’ in which the ‘symbolic basis’ and ‘revealing power’ of myth remain intact, acknowledging that human existence is based on an origin which it does not have at its command, and (2) ‘demystification’ that contains a critique of myth, which is here understood as a ‘secondary rationalization’ and ‘pseudo-logos’ (p. 332; see also Karlsen 2021: 62–3).

The imaginative possibilities opened by the symbolic realms of myth also expand the frames of our self-understanding. As Ricoeur points out in his work on personal and narrative identity, ‘self-understanding is an interpretation’ (1992: 114 n.1) that finds its mediation in narratives, signs, and symbols. Since they are essentially time bound and culture dependent in their descriptions and prescriptions, ‘there is no ethically neutral narrative’ (p. 115). Yet, we are not bound to certain values or belief systems revealed by mythical narratives but can critically evaluate them. In the laboratory of literature, we can sample possibilities and estimations before suiting the action to the word. This gives us time to think through implications and consequences of our plans, and it enables us to correct a course of action that has created undesired side effects.

### 3. WHAT IS MYTH?

‘Myth’ is a word with multiple meanings. In everyday language, myth often bears a denigrative sense. For instance, global warming can be called a ‘myth’ to question the phenomenon. Often people relate myth to ‘other religions’ or ‘primitive belief’, to ancient creation stories or other tales about gods. Some of us may even think about mythologies such as Greek or Norse Mythology.

Having its etymological roots in the Greek word *μῦθος* (*mythos*), which denotes a traditional story, ‘myth’ as a scholarly concept is nonetheless a modern construct born in the 18th century (Von Hency 2001). The scholarship on myth offers an abundance of nuanced accounts of ‘myth’. Yet, defining myth is difficult, and an overarching definition may not be possible (Honko 1972; Frog 2018). The fact that the study of myth is scattered over various fields is reflected in different definitions of myth. Anthropological theories of myth tend to be theories about culture, psychological theories of myth are theories about the mind, and sociological theories of myth are theories about society. There is no discipline of myth per se; hence, there is no study of myth *as* myth (Segal 2004: 2).

Some general trends can be recognized though. In the 18th and 19th centuries, scholars mainly understood myths as stories pertaining to ‘other’ cultures and as primitive counterparts to science, while in the 20th century, the focus shifted to structural and semiotic concerns enabling the study of myths as mental models. Since the 1990s, the study of mythical discourse has become increasingly popular. Instead of attempting to define myth, mythical discourse offers a frame that brings together the different ways of defining myth, thus enabling different, even competing points of view. Mythical discourse has steered scholarly attention to smaller units of myth, for instance to mythical symbols and motifs<sup>2</sup> in their actual use and to the ways in which the traditions related to mythology form, evolve, and operate in a society (Doty 2000; Siikala 2014: 19; Frog 2018: 33, 2021: 62).

<sup>2</sup> A mythical image refers to a smaller unit, a symbol, such as ‘Thor’, while a mythical motif refers to a combination of at least two symbols connected to each other with a verb, for instance, ‘Thor hits with his hammer’ (Frog 2014: 63, 2018: 25).

For instance, the swan was a mythical and sacred animal for the Finno–Ugric peoples. Even today, the swan as a mythical image carries symbolic meanings, which are circulated in art and used for commercial purposes. The move towards structural and semiotic concerns has enabled us to recognize myths as an essential part of all cultures, including contemporary Western culture (Segal 2004; Frog 2018). Myth is no longer something to ridicule or to get rid of, but rather something to explore in order to expand our understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

In the 21st century, overarching definitions of myth are less popular than before, and if a definition is pursued at all, it tends to leave space for various kinds of content and the evolving nature of myth. For instance, Segal (2004: 4–6) defines myth as a tenaciously held story about something that is significant for its adherents, where the main figures are personalities (divine, human, or animal). Or there can be notably complex definitions, such as that of Doty (2000: 33–4), which identifies seventeen aspects of mythology.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of the variety of definitions, ordinarily nothing is deemed a myth unless it is connected to convictions about the world and how it works, or to the agents and forces inhabiting it, whether in the present or the past (Frog 2018: 5). Myths are or were linked to socially established convictions, and they accomplish something significant for their adherents, albeit the content of what is considered significant can vary considerably (Segal 2004: 4–5; Frog 2018: 5). Hence, there is a communal aspect to myth. Mythical motifs tend to travel across cultures and talk to people universally (Ricoeur 1991: 488).

Whether we see myth as primitive science (e.g. Tylor and Frazer), false consciousness (e.g. Marx), unconscious projection (e.g. Freud and Jung), or an expression of the sacred (e.g. Eliade) (see Von Hendy 2001), our orientation influences what and how we believe the function and scope of myth to be. When educators determine which aspects of a myth will be emphasized, and which will be ignored, they simultaneously establish how and what one will learn with and from it.

In the following, we will inspect Farrelly’s approach and consider its strengths<sup>4</sup> and weaknesses. Then we will consider how an alternative approach to myth could broaden the realms of environmental imagination.

<sup>3</sup> According to Doty (2000: 33–4), a mythological corpus consists of (1) a usually complex network of myths that are (2) culturally important, (3) imaginal (4) stories, conveying by means of (5) metaphorical and symbolic diction, (6) graphic imagery, and (7) emotional conviction and participation (8) the primal, foundational accounts (9) of aspects of the real, experienced world and (10) humankind’s roles and relative statuses within it. Mythologies may (11) convey the political and moral values of a culture and (12) provide systems of interpreting (13) individual experience within a universal perspective, which may include (14) the intervention of suprahuman entities as well as (15) aspects of the natural and cultural orders. Myths may be enacted or re-enacted in (16) rituals, ceremonies, and dramas, and (17) they may provide materials for secondary elaboration, the constituent mythemes (mythic units) having become merely images or reference points for a subsequent story, such as a folktale, historical legend, novella, or prophecy.

<sup>4</sup> Farrelly’s article has other important aspects that we do not address here, such as his contribution to Michael Bonnet’s (2017) vision to experience the world ‘primordially’ and connecting this vision to ‘contemplative pedagogies’ (see Pulkki et al. 2017).

#### 4. FARRELLY AND THE POWER OF IMPLICIT MYTH

What is striking in Farrelly's conceptualization of myth is that it is remarkably secular and does not discuss the communal aspects of myth. Considering the variations in the scholarship on myth, the difficulties in defining myth, and the fact that anyone is of course free to provide a definition of their own, it would be odd to say this is wrong. However, when discussing myth-aided EE, a closer look at the philosophical and/or ideological underpinning of myth is advisable. Farrelly describes myth as a story which may be ancient or new, yet 'gets to the bedrock of reality and meaning, and functions to help us [...] to perceive the world differently, while also offering a motive power to continue plumbing the depths of the meaning of our lives in relationship with our world' (Farrelly 2019: 133). Relying on Harald Oliver, he continues to write that 'myths are not just about gods' but rather 'about revealing the inherent relationship between things' (p. 134). Furthermore, he makes use of Jean Waardenburg's notion of implicit myth:

Myths also exist as the meaningful but not fully developed elements of a potential story. Such elements are emotionally loaded and experienced rather than explicitly formulated; the emotions and experiences are often linked with feelings of solidarity between members of a group or between individuals. Mythic elements derive their force precisely from the fact that they suggest rather than explain, and that they constitute cores of meaning without having been put together in a definite pattern. They function as foundation stones for certain basic assumptions in the life of a community or a person. (Waardenburg 1980: 55, quoted in Farrelly 2019: 133)

Farrelly identifies the poetry of the British poet and philologist Gerald Manley Hopkins as an implicit myth sensitizing the readers to recognize the intrinsic value of nature and inviting them to a mythopoetic dwelling in the world. At the end of his article, discussing the classroom reality, he concretizes his vision by listing qualities of implicit myth present in Hopkins' poems and suggests that we begin to recognize these characteristics also in children's and other literature and embed such literature throughout K–12 (ages 5–18) education. The qualities of 'implicit myth' Farrelly mentions are the following:

recognizing and attending to the intrinsic value of places, including botanical, terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and their resident creatures; perceiving these creatures and places as possessing a unique (perhaps almost 'magical') existence, essence and placed-ness in relation to all other things; and that human beings are portrayed as possessing the capacity to perceive the natural world more intimately, and bear a responsibility to be stewards of it, capable of either promoting and contributing to nature's fecundity or its destruction. (Farrelly 2019: 140)

Interestingly, Farrelly makes no reference to world mythology or religion when analysing Hopkins' poetry. He identifies no mythical image or motif that would connect Hopkins to mythical traditions or beliefs considered significant for a certain culture or community. By contrast, James Finn Cotter (1989) analyses Hopkins' poetry in close comparison with ancient Christian, Greek, and Egyptian mythology as well as Vedic literature showing how Hopkins' poetry embodies a variety of mythical themes expressed in these traditions. Regarding Hopkins' keen studies of mythology, these connections were hardly a coincidence. Hopkins was also a devoted Christian who was born into a High Church Anglican family, converted to

Roman Catholicism and became a Jesuit priest for whom the world was charged with the grandeur of God.<sup>5</sup>

Farrelly is aware of the archaic and religious underpinnings of myth when writing that myths are not just about gods (2019: 133) or when referring to the ‘magical’ existence of creatures and places (p. 140). Yet, while scholars dedicated to the study of myth seek to understand texts in relation to transgenerationally and transculturally emerging mythical motifs and images, Farrelly’s definition of implicit myth<sup>6</sup> steers our attention to the secular appreciation of nature, and he chooses poems from Hopkins that do not contain directly visible references to ancient mythologies.

Why would one rely on a definition and on examples of myth that highlight an aesthetic–relational appreciation of nature instead of delving into mythical stories that explicitly tap into the ancient symbolic realms abundant with superhuman creatures and powers? As Farrelly clearly states, his goal is to cultivate awareness of the intrinsic worth of nature and humanity’s responsibility to be its steward. While this is an important goal, our concern is that if a secular approach becomes the only way of using myth in EE, it narrows the possibilities myth can offer.

The Western public sphere is dominated by a secular outlook (Taylor 2007; Habermas 2011). Likewise, Western public educational systems tend to be based on secular world-views which are seen as ‘socially, politically and epistemologically neutral’ (Ubani et al. 2019: 7). A secular outlook also dominates scholarly discussions even where acknowledging alternative ontologies would be unyielding, as in indigenous studies.<sup>7</sup> In a secular mindset, it is easier to argue for a relational attitude

<sup>5</sup> There is a famous poem from Hopkins (Bridges 1918: 26) entitled ‘The Grandeur of God’:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

<sup>6</sup> We are not convinced that ‘implicit myth’ can be given such a concrete and explicit list of qualities as Farrelly suggests because the whole idea of implicit myth is that it remains hidden (see also Doty 2000: 138). However, we fully support his idea of embedding literature embodying the qualities he mentions in EE.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, writing from the perspective of indigenous studies, Guttorm et al. (2021: 118) ask: ‘How do we care for the different ontologies and how does our writing change when those ontologies become true and real for us? If and when a researcher who wrote within Christian ontology, on or with God, would not be seen as a serious academic, how does it then become possible to write with an ontology and world, where Earth, Moon and Sun become acting and powerful entities [...] and life-giving and life-enabling elements? Can a serious academic retain credibility if deciding to see these as actors, and even care for them? Even hear them speak?’

towards nature while dropping the reference to superhuman powers in EE. Could it be that this, often implicit, demand of remaining ‘neutral’ in regard to religious world-views, often interpreted as the ‘absence’ of the religious (Rissanen 2019), has affected Farrelly’s construction of the notion of ‘implicit myth’? After all, unintentional ideological bias is not uncommon among scholars writing on myth. As Frog points out, ‘the very word myth is so deeply encoded with ideological and evaluative stances that these remain largely subliminal’ (Frog 2018: 2). Even though Farrelly’s approach does not rule out the possibility of including religiously versatile material, his secular choice is also likely to appeal to those who believe that religious material should *not* be implemented in public EE.

Drawing on Charles Taylor, Paul Ricoeur, and Andrew Stables, we suggest that we need material from different cultural and religious backgrounds because exploring different traditions makes education more open for a critical reflection on one’s own background and invites everyone into a dialogue about alternative world-views, which is especially needed for the peaceful coexistence of people with religious and nonreligious backgrounds (Sjöborg 2013; Kuusisto et al. 2016).

We argue that by identifying the religious and historical layers of myth in EE, we gain a broader range of meanings than a secular approach can offer alone. In addition to preparing the soil for immersive experiences in nature, facilitating mythopoetic thinking and sensitizing us to the intrinsic value of nature, as Farrelly does, an awareness of religious aspects of myth can introduce deeper layers of our cultural heritage. Furthermore, we develop the ability to challenge our own beliefs and prejudices when confronted with other world-views that affect our relation to nature. Due to their complexity, myths sensitize us to the manifold and often contradictory demands of our interrelation with and dependency on nature for our survival.

We take ‘mythical stories’ to denote narratives that are (1) largely agreed to be myths, such as creation myths of various cultures, or (2) stories that entail images or motifs pertaining to mythologies of different cultures. These stories may entail religious elements but also go far beyond the ‘religious vs secular’ dichotomy. After all, the dichotomy dates back only centuries (Dubuisson 2003), whereas many myths originate in cultural spaces where no such categories existed. Focussing on mythical images and motifs, we can compare a wide range of narratives such as folk stories and legends, poems and even artefacts from popular culture in EE. For instance, the story of Noah’s Ark can be found in Judaic, Christian, and Islamic traditions, but it also appears in the contemporary pop culture as a metaphor with a transformative power; in the USA, the metaphor of Noah’s Ark motivated evangelical Christians to provide funding for endangered species when the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was discussed in 1996 (Menning 2022). We are aware that stories such as Noah’s Ark are not considered myths in some religious communities, and that sometimes myths can serve unethical purposes, such as the Nazi deployment of myths. Therefore, pedagogical tact is needed when discussing these stories in the classroom.

When raising the question of unintended ideological bias in the case of Farrelly, we need to be fair and ask ourselves what our choices reveal about our ideological biases. How might our own backgrounds and beliefs affect our arguments? As we are not necessarily the best possible judges of our own biases, we must rely on others to make such judgements. However, we acknowledge that our experience of working together across different religious and secular belief systems leads us to support a pluralist framework based on ‘epistemic humility’ (Fisch 2016) that leaves room for alternative ontologies in EE.

## 5. ALTERNATIVE ONTOLOGIES IN SECULAR, RELIGIOUS, AND INDIGENOUS MYTHOLOGY

Supporting pluralism in environmental education, Andrew Stables (2020: 898) warns against leashing EE to certain theoretical frameworks: ‘it would be foolish to carry out environmental education without ethical or ontological frameworks, but it would be equally foolish to impose any one such framework in toto on teachers and students’. Stables approaches EE through the ‘humanism vs posthumanism’ dichotomy, arguing that a humanist ontology does not necessarily lead to an exploitation of nonhuman nature, and that posthumanism does not automatically lead to respect for nature. Focussing on the human being’s responsibility as a steward of nature can provide a working ground for sustainable lifestyles, whereas posthumanism focussing on human–machine assemblages may render the concern for nature marginal or even irrelevant (p. 897).

Like Stables, we believe that responsible relationships to nature can be inspired by various ontological frameworks, humanist or posthumanist, secular or religious. Indeed, we would even like to make stronger claims than he does. To some extent, we are all trapped in our own world-views; that is, our deeply held, more or less articulated beliefs about ourselves and the world. Likewise, our educational systems are based on more or less shared beliefs and values. To extend the point, it is impossible to carry out any kind of education without any ethical and ontological framework. While the dominant frameworks are not equally shared by everyone, but tend to favour the majority’s beliefs, values, and lifestyles, we can transform our beliefs by encountering other belief systems (Fisch 2016: 63). As educators, we have a responsibility to constantly question our own beliefs.

As Charles Taylor argues, the choices we make with learning materials have an effect on how students might perceive themselves and their cultural backgrounds, which are sources of their self-esteem. For instance, expanding curricula from dead white males to non-Western and female achievements is an act of recognizing a wider spectrum of identities (Taylor 1994: 65–6). The move towards culturally responsive and relevant education is also effective in improving the affective domains related to learning and thus also beneficial for learning outcomes (Aronson and Laughter 2016). Yet, evoking changes in attitudes and ways of life is extremely difficult and requires resonance with and grounding in one’s personal value system. If EE can find ways of providing reasons for respecting nature using

educational pathways that tap into different cultural and religious traditions, including secular, religious, and indigenous, the chances of effecting a change in learners' attitudes increase. Correspondingly, reflecting on alternative world-views can be more effective than building on the assumed neutrality of the secular world-view alone. EE can become culturally responsive, present various traditions in a spirit of equality and appreciation, and it will then provide the students and teachers with multiple motives for preserving nature. Moreover, EE opens our eyes for similarities and diversity when comparing different traditions and their arguments for sustainable lifestyles.

Innumerable mythical images and motifs recur across cultures. For instance, in various traditions, birds have been ascribed an ability to deliver messages between the human and the divine worlds. Despite the similarities, different mythologies build on different ontological frameworks and introduce different kinds of powers that operate in these worlds. The transcendent and almighty God of Christianity is different from the anthropomorphic gods of Ancient Greece with their vices and virtues. Likewise, the relation of human beings to their God or gods differ, and the origins of the cosmos are conceptualized in profoundly different ways. According to Sámi mythology, the boundaries among gods, animals, and humans are fluid (Joy 2014: 119), while the three monotheistic religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam distinguish between God, human beings, and nonhuman nature.

Rather than being enclosed in one single comprehensive belief system or explicit ontology, myths often contain many layers and unite aspects from different frames of thought and symbolic expressions. For instance, the mythical elements in Finnish spell traditions contain layers from archaic Eurasian beliefs, from Nordic pre-Christian beliefs as well as from Christian beliefs and symbols (Siikala 2014: 58–9). Hence, even a single mythical story can at once be based on a variety of ontological options. Classifying this kind of material with the help of a single category does not do justice to the richness of these traditions.

## 6. MYTHICAL STORIES DEPICTING RESPONSIVE AND COMPLEX RELATIONSHIPS TO NATURE

To further elaborate our argument that ancient mythical stories can help us re-establish responsive relations to nature, we will introduce stories that exemplify three different kinds of relationships not easily accessible through secular scientific approaches: (1) animals as protectors of humans, (2) animals as messengers, and (3) animals as helpers in our attempts to transcend the mundane world to the divine world.

Firstly, in many mythical stories, animals protect and help humans, often saving their lives:

- According to the Hebraic flood myth and the biblical story about Noah's Ark, the dove helped Noah to find solid land by bringing him a freshly plucked olive leaf, and then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth (see Genesis 8:8–12).

- According to the biblical Book of Jonah, Jonah was thrown overboard into the raging sea. He would not have survived this, unless a huge fish<sup>8</sup> had swallowed him and, commanded by God, vomited Jonah onto dry land upon his prayer from inside the belly of the fish (see Jonah 1:15–2:10).
- In the Islamic tradition, there is a story of how Muhammed and his companion entered a cave when fleeing their enemies, and God sent his protecting angels to conceal them from their enemies (Quran, Surah 9:40). The text in the Quran does not specify how Muhammad and his companions were concealed,<sup>9</sup> but in traditional stories the concealment is most often achieved by a spider weaving a web on the entrance of the cave, with pigeons building a nest in it (Rubin 2003: 45).
- Similarly, in the Christian tradition, the New Testament story of baby Jesus and his parents fleeing to Egypt (Matthew 2:13–15) has, for instance, in Bulgarian and British oral tradition been expanded by a narrative in which the young family is hiding in a cave and saved by a spider weaving a web across the entrance. The enemies were fooled and passed the cave (Alexander 2002: 277; Krzeszewska 2014: 67, 72).

Secondly, animals, especially birds, are often seen as messengers creating bonds between gods (or, alternatively, the one and only God) and human beings.

- According to Finno–Ugric mythology, the world is created by the breaking of a waterfowl’s egg. Waterfowls have been so important to Finno–Ugric people that they have been called ‘people of waterfowl’ (Siikala 2014: 174). The waterfowl’s ability to dive and fly has enthralled people and is basic to several cultures. The swan, for example, was believed to have an ability to travel through different worlds, to reach the gods in the skies and visit the ancestors in the underworld. According to the Finnish national epic *Kalevala*, the swan of Tuonela lives in a river that separates the worlds of the dead and the living. It accompanies the dead in the transition from life to death. The one who tries to kill the swan will set forth their own death, as happened to the hero Lemminkäinen (SKVR XIV: 380–460).<sup>10</sup>
- According to the Hebrew Bible, Balaam’s donkey saved him from doing something wrong, which would have cost his life: Balaam wanted to curse the people of Israel despite the fact that God told him he should not. When Balaam saddled his donkey, God sent an angel standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand. Balaam did not see the angel, but his donkey did and turned off the road. Balaam beat his donkey three times. At last, it opened its mouth and spoke to him. Then the Lord opened Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel telling

<sup>8</sup> A natural scientist might be tempted to correct that this must have been a whale, not a fish. However, the biblical text talks about a fish.

<sup>9</sup> According to the Quran, ‘Allah sent down His serenity’ (Quran, Surah 9:40).

<sup>10</sup> However, this death was not final. Lemminkäinen was recreated with the help of a bee bringing curative honey (SKVR XV: 390–560).

him: 'I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now' (Numbers 22:32–3). Thus, the donkey helped Balaam realize his sin when contradicting God's will.

- In the Christian tradition, the dove is the symbol of the Holy Spirit. According to the Gospel of Matthew (3:16–17), when Jesus was baptized, he 'went up out of the water. Suddenly the heavens were opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and resting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!"' Here an animal is linked to the divine in such a way that it represents the Holy Spirit in metaphors and iconography.

Thirdly, in mythical stories, animals and plants are believed to have the role of helping humans transcend the spheres of mundane life and enter into the world of the divine, or to reflect upon the human condition.

- According to the myths of Sámi people, especially the shaman, but also ordinary people were able take the form of an animal during trance or sleep and travel to a different world in order to meet their ancestors and wise spirits who could guide and help them. In Nordic shamanism, animals are believed to assist the shaman's trips to the underworld and back (Siikala 1992: 251).
- In the myth of the Great Oak, which appears in many cultures, a giant oak grows out of magical substances (e.g. the ashes of a previously great oak) and blocks the sunlight, which causes the grain crops to die and lakes to freeze. Only a mythical being or deity, a small man from the sea, is able to hack it down, enabling the sun to shine and crops grow again (Haavio 1967: 346–50). For ancient Finnic people, the myth of the Great Oak seems to be related to the annual calendric cycle (Ridderstad 2014), and in Finnish folk poems, the oak is sometimes described as *tasmatammi* (Haavio 1967: 350–1), a tree that connects heaven and earth. Thus, the oak has similar features as 'the world pillar', which was imagined to support and rotate the sky, being one of the most common cosmic images (p. 351). Even though the myth of the Great Oak indicates the threat of chaos in the world (Siikala 2014: 200), cutting down the Great Oak does not signify the end of the world. When interpreted as related to the annual calendric cycle, it can signify the (annual) cycle of light and darkness, growth and decay (Ridderstad 2014: 325).
- In his 'Three Godly Discourses' about 'The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air' (1849), which refer to Jesus' sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:26–30), the Danish philosopher, theologian, and writer Søren Kierkegaard (2013: 6) presents the lily and the bird as teachers from whom a human being not only shall learn 'silence, obedience, joy' but also, more generally, 'what it is to be a human being and what, from a godly standpoint, is the requirement for being a human being'. Remarkably, on the backdrop of the Christian

tradition, nature—where ‘God’s will is done, as in heaven, so also on earth’ (p. 32)—becomes the bridge between human beings and God, showing human beings (1) how to be silent and wait in order to be able to hear God, (2) attend to the divine will, and (3) enjoy life *today* despite all suffering and ‘abide in God’ without being concerned about the future (p. 58). Mjaaland (2021: 348) offers ‘an eco-philosophical reading’ of Kierkegaard’s three discourses, arguing that human relations are shown to be embedded in nature, which is here understood as God’s creation: ‘The silence and unconditioned obedience of the lily, and also the singing joy of the bird, point towards a [...] letting-be and being-there, rather than [...] controlling and exploiting nature’ (p. 349). Nonetheless, Kierkegaard is aware of the ambivalence of nature and of human failure, which is why he, according to Mjaaland, introduces ‘the voice of the gospel as a counter example to the Romantic imagination of nature’ (p. 350).

By following the lines of thought indicated by the aforementioned mythical stories, we are inspired to review our current relation to nature and to reform it into a more responsive one. Mythical stories suggest, yet do not dictate or impose, alternative ways of relating to animals and plants. They open a possibility for cultivating responsive relationships with flora and fauna, and the possibility that plants and animals can speak to us, protect us, and help us transcend the boundaries of our lives, if we listen carefully enough.

These stories inspire us to imagine animals and plants as creatures that can provide new insights for us. But does this require an especially friendly reading of these stories?<sup>11</sup> A critical reader might object that these stories reflect an instrumental attitude towards members of the animal kingdom insofar as animals are valued as helpers or messengers promoting human beings’ survival, but not appreciated for their own sake.

However, if we consider a story of a human being helping others, for instance, Bill building a cover for Anna to help her escape persecutors, would we assume that the story reflects an instrumental attitude towards Bill? Stories are always interpreted in a context. This is where the reader’s own assumptions come to the fore. Our experience as educators tells us that students, especially children, are more inclined to see the possibility of companionship than the instrumental value of animals. Of course, all stories and poems lend themselves to multiple interpretations. Considering the historical layers of their oral and written transmission, myths are especially rich. As with the discussion of any literary text, a teacher’s task is three-fold: (1) to embrace the interpretations provided by the students, (2) to help them find alternative points of view, ideally focussing on the hopeful ones, and (3) to facilitate an understanding of the contrasts between different readings, and the historical background of the material in question.

<sup>11</sup> The Judeo-Christian tradition has been accused of being one of the major culprits for exploitation of nature (White 1967). Of course, it cannot be denied that certain elements of this tradition have been misused in the sense of an instrumental attitude to nonhuman nature. Yet, the biblical tradition and its Jewish and Christian interpretations are far richer than this.

## 7. TOWARDS TRANSFORMATIVE EE THROUGH MYTH

There have been voices that are sceptical towards the very possibility of transformative EE. For instance, Ruitenbergh maintains that ‘[t]ransformation is never transformative enough, being either too incremental or too small-scale (or both) to justify the optimism’ (Ruitenbergh 2020: 836). Instead, she proposes ‘aporetic environmental education, which does not seek a way out of the aporia, a way of getting environmental education “right”, but rather a different way of thinking (about) the impasse in which it finds itself’ (p. 836). Indeed, the seriousness of environmental problems should not be diminished by simplistic educational ideals. Rather, different ways of thinking about our current situation must be brought into the dialogue.

Despite all difficulties, we require avenues and highways of hope for the messages of transformation to travel. The terrifying information about climate change and the consequent looming environmental disasters may lead to an anxiety that paralyses rather than empowers. Eco-anxiety among children and young people has become increasingly widespread (Hickman et al. 2021; Pihkala 2022). While optimism may not be justified and even seem naïve, giving up hope would be the death of effective education. We must believe there is hope for humankind and that education can make a difference, otherwise the whole enterprise of EE becomes a fool’s errand (see Welz 2022). To return to Ricoeur: as opposed to unrealistic optimism, Ricoeur understands hope as a ‘passion for the possible’, which means a passion for realistic possibilities in a seemingly aporetic situation (Ricoeur 2004: 406). But how do we create hope with reasonable authenticity, and how do we inspire change without triggering anxiety? And how can mythical stories help us in this endeavour?

Myth taps into the deepest levels of human experience. Multiple interpretations are possible as myth departs from everyday logic and operates with metaphorical language. Hence, not unlike philosophy, myth invites us, teachers, and students, young and old, to be astonished and to wonder about the mysteries of the world (Welz 2023) rather than to search for the ‘right’ answers that would silence all our questions. Myth can extend logical reasoning and let us dwell with the inexplicable. The complexity and opacity of myth can energize us to explore new connections between ourselves and others and our environment. Becoming aware of the symbolic meanings attached to flora and fauna can change our perceptions of them, as they become indexed in new ways in our belief systems (Frog 2014). Like art, myths, metaphors, and symbols expand our reality (Ricoeur 1991: 130). Asking how nature helps us and how we can help it builds a different kind of relationship than the language of ‘ecosystem services’ reveals (see Grilli and Sacchelli 2020), where nature is conceptualized as a provider of services for human well-being. The former fosters a responsive relation, while the later binds us to instrumental dependency (Sepänmaa 2014: 25).

By discussing mythical stories with our students and by learning to observe our environment through them, myth can unfold its transformative power and make a difference that changes our lives in inducing respect for everything that surrounds us, be it organic or inorganic. When exploring the ‘inscape’ of each being as

suggested by Farrelly, or by deeming an animal as an ally, a friend, or a pathway to new insights, as our examples show, we are perhaps less inclined to mindlessly view nature merely as a tool for satisfying our immediate needs.

However, we must not fully reject instrumental attitudes. Complex issues necessitate complex points of reference. Mythical stories often reflect the struggle created by the need to use nature as a resource for human survival on the one hand, and the need for reverent conduct towards nature, on the other. Animals and plants are seen both instrumentally and noninstrumentally, both as nourishment for humans and as sentient creatures deserving of dignity. For instance, the Finno-Ugric peoples had complex beliefs and rites that helped them balance the powers attached to the bear, which was at the same time a resource for food and a god, a majestic and frightening animal (Siikala 2014: 386–7). Recognizing this two-fold attitude may help us reconsider the situation in which we find ourselves. We are not the first generation to struggle with life-threatening problems; this insight may reduce eco-anxiety and create hope for future generations.

For teachers, when learning with and from mythical stories alongside students, we are well advised to include dialogical processes on these traditions into ever-changing multidisciplinary curricula. If we want to discuss alternative ontological stances without imposing any of them on our students, it is vital for teachers to critically explore their own standpoints (Stables 2020). Mythical stories can complement knowledge derived from natural sciences by creating a sense of wonder and awe as well as a sense of belonging to nature with all the complexity that this relationship entails.

Nonetheless, the question may arise as to whether reading stories pertaining to various traditions requires adhering to the truth claims of these traditions, and whether it would be inappropriate to ask a teacher to include materials from a tradition they are not familiar with ‘from within’. We do not suggest initiating students to a particular world-view through certain myths. Rather, we suggest approaching mythical stories as any other literature, engaging with them through our imagination and letting them show their worlds to us. As a literary genre, mythical stories allow us to distinguish among the internal world of the text, the external world around the text, and our own imaginary journey between these worlds (see Ricoeur 1990: 157). We are free to enter and to exit mythical worlds—and to apply the insights we have won from the texts to our own being that is at once separate from the texts and influenced by them. As Ricoeur reminds us, reading texts of traditions other than our own invites us to take ‘responsibility, in imagination and in sympathy, for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern that other’ (Ricoeur 1995: 6–7). This ‘exchange of memories’ that Ricoeur calls ‘narrative hospitality’ (p. 8) challenges us to explore truth claims rather than impose them on others (Moyaert 2011: 104).

Thus, we do not aim to replace ordinary curricular contents by ancient myths from other cultures. However, we do suggest that the transfer of scientific knowledge on climate change can be supplemented with reflections on the influence of human conduct on nonhuman ‘nature’, including alternative approaches to fauna,

flora, and inanimate rock formations as expressed in myths. We neither want to prescribe at which grade level, courses, or lessons it would be best to add such reflections but rather leave it up to the different educational systems and educators to make context-sensitive choices.<sup>12</sup>

## 8. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: THE ROLE OF MYTH IN IMAGINING SUSTAINABLE WORLDS

Building on Farrelly's idea of myth-aided EE, we have argued that reading mythical stories from various cultural backgrounds may help us imagine sustainable worlds. Despite our reservations about Farrelly's notion of myth, we embrace his overall project of cultivating imagination in order to expand our possibilities of relating to nature. Studying myth through a notion of 'implicit myth' provided by Farrelly may facilitate immersive and dialogical experiences with nature by enhancing our aesthetic imagination, as Farrelly suggests, and also appeal to a wide range of people regardless of their backgrounds. Yet, as we hopefully have shown, there is no reason to restrict 'myth' to a secularized notion of 'implicit myth'; rather, we can employ the full potential of traditional mythical stories, including their archaic, spiritual, and religious aspects.

When approached with a curious and open mind, mythical stories present an enchanted world where birds reveal to us the secrets of life and spiders are our friends, a world where plants and animals do not just appear as resources but also as our dialogical partners who can teach us invaluable lessons about our own being in the world. This shift of focus can be transformative for those of us raised in the modern secular mindset and provide recognition for our students' different cultural and religious backgrounds, thus potentially motivating them to protect nature. Choosing learning materials from diverse cultural traditions, both secular and religious, and adopting a (self-)critical stance mitigates the risk of imposing a certain world-view on students.

Mythical stories embed us in a world that reaches far beyond our own experience and memory to the mythicized memory of our ancestors. We have argued that myth provides a middle ground between unjustified optimism and gloomy pessimism in EE by preparing learners to recognize the intrinsic value of flora and fauna, and to enter into responsive encounters with the environment, yet also by accepting the necessity of instrumental relationships. The ways in which we are entangled with our immediate surroundings is complex on many levels: we are dependent on arable soil and clean air to breathe. Mythical stories propose a variety of responsive ways of relating to plants and animals, which can make possible what currently seems impossible—a radical change of human habits and lifestyles.

At any rate, EE through myth has a transformative potential only to the extent that it opens hopeful vistas regarding the future (Welz 2022), helps us to cope

<sup>12</sup> For instance, in the Finnish educational system it is possible to conduct storytelling activities in which children empathize with mythical nature spirits (see Sintonen 2020; Byman et al. 2023), while in some other countries this may not be culturally meaningful or even legally possible.

with future-related fears, moral outrage, and grief because of ecological destruction, and inspires life-affirming care and compassion for other creatures. The success rate of EE also depends on whether students and larger communities or societies have the chance to co-imagine more sustainable ways of living. In this context, mythical stories can contribute to the creation of the resilience that we need to bear the emotional burden of an overwhelming situation with frustrating predictions of floodings, storms, fires, famines, and other life-threatening or even catastrophic events related to climate change.

Moreover, myth's aesthetic appeal combined with its complexity and opacity can provide a space for dwelling with paradoxes without being paralysed, since paradoxes of orientation can become courageous beginnings of new thinking (Welz 2016b, 2019). This dwelling with paradoxes may result in taking upon ourselves the responsibility ensuing from our responsivity. Responsibility may itself be viewed as a human response to someone or something (Buber 1978: 35; Nissen 2022: 77), for instance, climate change.

In this way, mythical stories and folktales can enable us to place ourselves differently in the surrounding world (Bruner 1996: 40). Literature is more than fiction, more than a mere thought experiment—it contains a rich treasure of experiences, of trial and error, and encourages us to see the world from various angles, thus also explicating the ambiguity of human history (Welz 2016a: 47). Inevitably, our imagination has ethical implications as it concerns the conditions, possibilities, and limits of human action (Welz 2022). Ultimately, the relevance of myth-aided EE depends on whether or not we manage to imagine sustainable worlds and realize the wisdom revealed by mythical stories.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article would not have been possible without interdisciplinary teamwork—Essi Maria Ikonen and Raili Keränen-Pantsu are responsible for the reflections on the philosophy of education and the approach to myth, particularly the discussion of Farrelly's account of myth, and the presentation of the Finno-Ugric tradition and the stories related to Islam, while Claudia Welz is responsible for the account of imagination as a means of ethical reorientation.

We would like to thank Paul Ilsley most warmly for the parlous questioning and for the resulting phenomenological editing, and also for facilitating our interdisciplinary work and personal interaction by intervening with Solomonic wisdom and judgement.

### FUNDING

Our work on this article was funded by Step Education in Järvenpää, Finland, enabling Ikonen and Keränen-Pantsu to develop theoretical and pedagogical approaches to environmental education (2020–21), and by the Aarhus University Research Foundation, which awarded a Starting Grant (AUFF-E-2020-7-22) to



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