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Book Discussion

Reconciling Poetry and Philosophy: Evaluating Maximilian De Gaynesford's Proposal

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*Poetry and philosophy have had a long and convoluted relation, characterized often by mutual antipathy and rarely by mutual acknowledgment and respect. Plato was one influential philosopher who trashed poetry's capacities to trade in the domain of truth and knowledge, but it was J. L. Austin who blew the final whistle by dismissing it as non-serious. And while for many poets that was an invitation to dismiss Austin, for many philosophers that was a confirmation of the overall discomfort they had already felt with respect to poetry. Just how wrong both parties were in this standoff is revealed in the latest book by Maximilian De Gaynesford, *The Rift in the Lute: Attuning Poetry and Philosophy*, which calls for a dismissal of the separation of the two and for their mutual cooperation. In this paper, we look at De Gaynesford's proposal, mostly praising its strong points and occasionally raising doubts regarding its success.*

Keywords: J. L. Austin, philosophy, poetry, Maximilian De Gaynesford

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that philosophers have, for the most part, ignored poetry (see Ribeiro 2009; Gibson 2015). Luckily, things are changing and poetry has started to attract attention. The latest book by Maximilian De Gaynesford, *The Rift in the Lute: Attuning Poetry and Philosophy*, is a much welcome addition to this trend, one which will for sure initiate its own wave of responses. Gaynesford does not aim to say much about the aesthetic or artistic value of poetry, and he doesn't dwell on issues of definition. Rather, he deals with one of the most influential claims regarding poetry ever made: J. L. Austin's

views on poetry as ‘not serious’. Determined to prove Austin wrong, Gaynesford sets out to develop a new account of poetry and to suggest new ways in which to view the convoluted relationship between poetry and philosophy.

As Gaynesford argues, it is of particular importance for analytic philosophy to turn to poetry, and to do so from the perspective of a speech act theory: it is here that “relations between literature and philosophy are at their worst” and “their antipathy” at its deepest (12-3). Consequently, to reconcile them, that is the place to start. How? By following the project of attunement—“a mutually shaping approach in which we really do philosophy in really appreciating poetry, doing the literary criticism necessary for this” (9). Gaynesford’s project is thus a matter not of applying philosophy to poetry—thus doing a philosophically minded literary criticism—but the one of “exercising our critical engagement with poems *in* engaging with philosophy, and exercising our critical engagement with philosophy *in* engaging with poems.” (10). Such joint collaboration is envisioned as a win-win situation for both: “The opportunity to appreciate philosophical distinctions and discriminations in poetry can improve our ability to discriminate features of philosophical significance. And this opportunity to grapple anew with philosophy in turn heightens our capacity to appreciate what is rich and subtle in poetry, which returns us more richly provided to pursue philosophy, from where we can go back more generously supplied to appreciate poetry, and so on, back and forth” (11).

At the centre of the attunement project is a radical turn from the way philosophers (and critics, to some extent) usually approach poetry, namely from the point of view of its alleged disconnection from the truth. While philosophers mostly attend to poetry in order to either show or to dispute that poetic language is incommensurable to the epistemic goals of conveying truth,¹ Gaynesford sets his theory in a completely different setting: that of philosophy of action. Rather than approaching poetry as a set of true or false statements or descriptions, Gaynesford suggests that saying things in poetry—uttering poetically—is not a matter of stating things but of doing things. Those familiar with Gaynesford’s philosophical profile will not be surprised to learn that his account is motivated by J. L. Austin’s famous statement about poetry not being serious.

These brief introductory remarks suffice to position Gaynesford’s book within the relevant theoretical framework: in the first part, Gaynesford works out the details of his attunement project by carefully and informatively elaborating on the ways in which Austin dismisses poetry as serious (ch. 1), and by examining how poets and critics (ch. 2), as opposed to philosophers (ch. 3), reacted to Austin’s remarks. He then moves on (chs. 4 and 5) to show how these debates reflected on poetry’s connection to truth, and ends by arguing for a paradigm shift (chs. 6

¹ See in particular essays gathered in Gibson (2015).

and 7): poetry should be viewed as a form of action, and poetic utterances as utterances which actually do things. Once this approach is taken, a need is generated to account for the responsibility and commitment of those creating poetry. In the second part, Gaynesford first analyzes (ch.7) what he calls ‘the Chaucer type utterances’ and, having explained their main features (chs. 9-11), applies his account to numerous Shakespeare’s sonnets. It is in this part that he engages in a rather insightful form of literary criticism, one which presupposes an attuned relationship between poetry and philosophy, showing the drawbacks of those critical views on Shakespeare which failed to appreciate what a philosophically minded reader can see in the sonnets, and what the sonnets can reveal to the reader open to philosophical concerns.

The richness of Gaynesford’s theoretical framework does not imply lack of detailed and meticulous exploration of its constituents, including, in the opening and closing chapter, a detailed analysis of real world examples in which poetry was taken seriously enough for its creators to face serious legal issues. In many ways, his interpretation of the relationship between poetry and philosophy is insightful, primarily due to his exhausting overview of various poets, critics and philosophers who had something to say on the topic. Gaynesford’s analysis along these lines will challenge the somewhat dominant view according to which philosophers, on the whole, are hostile to poetry, and according to which poetry has, for the most part, been the “victim of Austin’s efficiencies”. It will also cast doubt on the way Austin’s views on poetry are most commonly interpreted. As Gaynesford argues, though Austin represents poetry as non-serious use of language, where language is not used in the normal way, or is used in hollow and void way, parasitic upon the normal use (39), he neither argues for these claims, nor does he clarify their meaning. Austin’s crucial failure is the fact that “the combination of high-handedness and half-heartedness” in his writings on poetry, as well as the examples he chose to support his view, “give the strong impression that he recognized something forced about ... this insistence that poetic utterances are *not* to be understood in terms of things that are done” (259, emphasis original). In other words, Austin’s remarks “make no distinction between types and instances of poetic utterances”, offer “no arguments to demonstrate that *no* poetry is serious”, and ignore the ambiguity of notions he uses to express the alleged non-seriousness (39). The dominantly poetic manner itself, in which Austin writes about poetry, as compared to his other writings, reveals, on Gaynesford’s reading, that Austin himself has hard time accepting what he says—his argument, in other words, “resists taking itself seriously” (44).

Gaynesford further argues that most of the poets who set out to respond to Austin failed to properly engage with his views, mostly due to a prejudice they harboured about philosophy’s overall distrust of philosophy. And while critics have for the most part turned Austin into a

bad guy unappreciative of the value of poetry, Gaynesford argues that Austin is far more appreciative of poetry than Plato or Frege ever were; his bad reputation is a consequence of critics' failure to engage properly with philosophical views. The critics are, generally, just as "careless and disdainful" (58) towards Austin as Austin is toward poetry. Sadly, philosophers are no better. In failing to properly engage with Austin's remarks, they "expose their own prejudice against poetry: they condone the insults, neglect the tensions and contradictions, hide the ambiguities, and assume a determinacy where all is vagueness". Consequently, "no wonder so much that is philosophically significant in poetry is ignored, and so much in philosophy that is relevant to the appreciation of poetry goes unrecognized" (68-9). As Gaynesford further demonstrates in the fifth chapter, another failure on the part of philosophers relates to the fact that for the most part, they analyzed poetry as if poetry was to be evaluated from the perspective of whether or not it told the truth about the world. Such misconception is itself an outcome of the 'governing assumption' among philosophers, one which Austin himself set out to refute, according to which it is the main function of language to describe things. Whereas Austin wanted to show that language also does things, i.e. that we do things when we utter propositions, philosophers remained focused on analyzing poetry's success or failure to correctly describe things, and completely ignored the fact that it too can get things done. On Gaynesford's view, "this way of approaching poetry renders essential features of poetry invisible and distorts literary criticism" (261). To amend such mistreatment, Gaynesford offers his own, attuned account.

Gaynesford's analysis showed that, appearances aside, philosophers and poets do agree that poetic uses of language are exempt from issues of commitment and responsibility. However, it is precisely this presupposition that is wrong, which can only be acknowledged once poetry is approached from the standpoint of philosophy of action, and within it, from the perspective of a speech act theory. Within such "realigned debate", issues of commitment and responsibility can be reassessed. As Gaynesford argues, poets can use language seriously, for "to be serious is to acknowledge what is required if one is to be taken seriously: a commitment to be reasonably clear about what one means, to be willing to explain what one says, to account for what one claims. And it is not only possible but actual that poets commit themselves responsibly in these various ways (for example, in essays, reviews, manifestos, interviews)" (110). Crucial questions that are to be asked with respect to poetry under such an account are questions "about who is accountable for a particular utterance, what was intended by some particular choice of words, whether the action performed is one for which its author can be praised or blamed"—questions, as Gaynesford argues, that already "define literary criticism and which commentators on poetry have placed at the centre of their endeavours" (112). As a crucial example of

a poet who used poetry in this manner, Gaynesford refers to Chaucer, whose poems are riddled with what Gaynesford calls Chaucer-type utterances. These utterances are composed of a first person concatenated with a verb in the present indicative active (i.e. I dedicate, I direct) and they correspond to what would in non-poetry be equivalent to ‘explicit performatives’—though naturally the proper classification is complicated by the fact that such performatives are further divided into various subgroups. As Gaynesford warns us, there is a considerable disagreement regarding this type of utterances, but he nevertheless goes on to elaborate on four main features they exhibit: doing (in uttering the relevant sentence, the speaker does something beyond uttering), phrasing (the sentence uttered contains a sentential clause consisting of a subject term (the first person pronoun in the nominative) concatenated with a verb of doing (first-person singular, present tense, indicative mood, active voice) combined with an explicit or implicit ‘hereby’ or its equivalent); naming (the verb in the sentential clause is a word for what the speaker does in uttering the sentence) and securing (the act named by the verb in the sentential clause is assuredly performed in uttering the sentence). Given that these four features can be employed in variety of ways, analysing various combinations in which they come together in any given poem offers additional chance for philosophers of language to analyse them, but it also offers to critics a possibility to analyze such poems from different perspectives—after all, that is what the attunement approach is meant to initiate.

To support his claims, in the final chapters of the book Gaynesford turns to Shakespeare’s sonnets and analyses how the great bard uses the four features of Chaucer-type utterance. “Recognizing the dramatic salience of the type has the power to develop and change the way we see the sequence [of sonnets] as a whole, as well as the individual poems of which it is composed” states Gaynesford (263), and goes on to show numerous ways in which Shakespeare deploys the four features, often modifying them, even to the point where it is not altogether certain whether the Chaucer type has in fact been used. However, such ambiguity is identified as the source of variations of meaning of the sonnets, which result from different ways in which phrases and lines in poems might be understood. Such an approach enables Gaynesford to, among other things, analyse ways in which some of Shakespeare’s sonnets are imbued with Cartesian type of scepticism, with considerations regarding limits and limitations, obligations and duties, one’s solipsistic worries, etc. It further enables him to analyse ways in which different poems reflect on poetry as a mode of using language and on poetry as a form of action, which in turn draws attention to the means we have at our disposal to study poetry, and to the philosophical issues generated by these means.

Gaynesford's account of poetry departs from some of the ways in which poetry is traditionally analyzed, which will either seem like a welcome new paradigm to be happily embraced, or like a dead-end street to be quickly abandoned. There are, we think, many important aspects of his proposal which give us a more profound understanding of poetry, and his ambition to reconcile poetry and philosophy seems promising—though the question remains whether those untrained in philosophy could appreciate poetry generally and individual poems in ways Gaynesford envisions. Gaynesford does not place much emphasis on the aesthetic aspects of poetry, and when he does, he subjects them to the goals that poetic utterances containing such aesthetic properties are to realize. By thus instrumentalizing what for many is the crucial aspect of poetry and poetic experience, Gaynesford's theory might be dismissed by authors who oppose subjecting poetry to philosophical concerns. On the other hand, there have been attempts recently, predominantly made by literary scholars or poets themselves, to show ways in which poetry (and literature more generally) manages to bring about some more tangible changes, whether in the mindset of individual reader or within wider social groups and cultures.² For those who appreciate such approach to poetry and who share such views on its potential, Gaynesford's book might serve as an insightful pointer on how poetry might have such power, as his account is well suited to explain the tendency of critics to talk of poetry as achieving (or having the effect of initiating) intellectual paradigm changes. Another way in which Gaynesford's account is inspiring relates to what it might add to our understanding of the poetic language and everyday communication. Gaynesford notes that "examples of poetic utterances reveal underlying distinctions in the way poetry does things with words. The addition of new categories of actions, some peculiar to poetry, reveals ways in which philosophy can increase knowledge of language-use by attending to poetry." (114) It would be theoretically useful to identify those speech-acts 'peculiar to poetry' and see in which relation they stand with other kinds of speech acts. If regular speech acts as stating or promising can be incorporated in poems, is there a place for poetic speech acts in everyday communication? Do poetic speech acts turn everyday communication into poetry or is it so that they cannot be part of it since it would mean that they are not exclusively poetic? Identifying those speech acts 'peculiar to poetry' would be a good start in analyzing the relation between poetry and other uses of language.

The backbone to Gaynesford's proposal is the idea of poetry as a form of action. To many, it is this particular premise in his overall account that might be the hardest to swallow. Of course Gaynesford is aware of that, and he dedicates the entire chapter 5 to smooth some possible objections. Three he sees as the most pressing: first, whether poetic utterances can indeed be understood as action, given that they

² Consider among others Attridge (2015), Spolsky (2015).

do not resemble our commonsense understanding of what an action is—namely, a physical movement. Second, Gaynesford raises the question about the ‘deed done’ via the action contained in poetic utterance: are these things done once and for all (as when Chaucer dedicates his poem to the Lord), or are they done anew each time someone reads a certain poem? Third set of problems concerns the issue of agency: who in fact is doing the deed, the poet, the poem, the ‘lyric subject’ or some other theoretical postulate? With respect to the latter two questions, Gaynesford ultimately concludes that their theoretical implications relate to interpretations of individual poems, and do not amount to reasons to dismiss his theory. To answer the first question, he invokes a distinction introduced by Austin himself, between ordinary physical actions and the special nature of the act of saying something. Claiming that the poetic utterance falls under the latter category, he ultimately sees the problem of classifying poetic utterances as instances of an action as a question that should be considered within philosophy of action, rather than as a question pertaining to debates on poetry. Independently of whether or not such an answer is sufficient to silent those who might object to his approach, it is not altogether a mistake to say that Gaynesford should tell us more about his own understanding of action, given the complexities involved in the notion itself, particularly when introduced into aesthetic debates (Davies 2011). This is particularly so given the emphasis he puts on the notion of responsibility, and on the question of ‘whether what was stated has been performed’, which he poses as a criterion for the poem’s success (as opposed to the question of whether what is stated is true). While interviews, diaries and other evidential support he invokes to support his theory might work for some poets, they do not necessarily account for many others, particularly those who are long gone.

Gaynesford’s tactic of undermining Austin’s disregard for poetry as non-serious is simple: since Austin does not discriminate between different kinds of poetic expression and claims on various occasions that “poetry is ‘a use of language’ which is ‘not serious’” all we need to prove him wrong is find one instance of poetry that can be regarded as serious. Of course, the idea of “serious” and “non-serious” uses of language is a complex one since it derives from very vague and ambiguous use of the terms (see 42-68), but what Gaynesford is devoted to is to find (at least) one instance of poetry that can be “responsible, committed, and thus ‘serious’”, that is, that can be used to back up the claim that we can “do things with poetry” in the real world. According to him, responsibility can be of three sorts: pragmatic, aesthetic and ethical (107-8). It is important to notice that according to Gaynesford there is no responsibility without intention: “Did the person who performed this action really mean to do what in fact they did? Did they realize what obligations would be laid on them by doing this? Did they accept, consent to, or undertake these obligations? For if the answer to any of

these questions is ‘No’, then we may refuse to hold the person responsible for what was done, or at least qualify their responsibility, at each of the three levels: pragmatic, aesthetic, ethical.” (109) Trying to give an answer to questions of this sort in relation to poems whose authors are long gone could be puzzling. How do we reconcile the temporality of the poem’s author with the atemporality of the work of art? If the poet had a certain intention at the moment of the utterance, that is, at the moment he penned it in the form of a poem, he could be held accountable at that moment, but the analysis becomes metaphysically dubious once the referent of the “I” in a poem is gone—provided we can agree to identify it with the author as Gaynesford does when he claims that “in successful poetic utterances, poets perform acts of responsibility and commitment” (114). On the other hand, if we do not identify it with the poet, then all talk about real-life commitment and responsibility becomes vacuous.

Gaynesford acknowledges that “some would deny that responsibility and commitment are ever possible in the particular context that is poetry” and defends his position once again claiming that we need only one good example of “serious” poetry: “To undermine [Austin’s position], we need not argue that poetry is always, or indeed usually, responsible, committed, and thus ‘serious’. We need only produce examples of commitment-apt utterances in poetry where there is a genuine attempt to make that commitment, and where that commitment is indeed made.” (110) The Chaucer-type phrases are thus introduced as indicators of responsibility. Still, this is not an unequivocal answer since it leads to the question: who is the agent? Gaynesford acknowledges that there is no simple answer to this question and proposes a case by case approach—every poem will provide a new challenge: “(...) the claim that poetic uttering can count as a form of action, a speech action, raises difficulties. But none of these difficulties amount to objections to the overall claim. Rather, they set an agenda for the interpretation of specific poems, a list of questions that interpretations must resolve to count as satisfying. And this agenda proves an essential device. For where these difficulties arise, they direct the attention to the very issues that the poem itself is trying to raise.” (106)

Gaynesford’s strategy is to inspect every poem, or perhaps even every verse in a poem, to find a proof of commitment on the part of speaker to the content of the poetic utterance. If we find one example of a committed speaker in a poem we have falsified Austin’s claim that all poetic utterances are non-serious. If we concede this point, agree with Gaynesford’s interpretation of Austin’s view of poetry (see ch. 3) and find one or more poems that satisfy the criteria of his action-oriented approach to poetry, we can still wonder if the fact that we can analyze only a small portion of poems using this adapted speech-act framework does not point to a weaknesses of the proposed approach. One counter-example is enough to falsify a theory, but we need more than one exam-

ple (or a few of them) to build our theory. This is true especially if the theory we try to falsify is in fact not about the particular phenomena we focus on in our attacks on it, and Austin's theory is not about poetry.

Gaynesford's account could be bolstered by a more substantial account of the way in which composing a poem can be understood as an instance of action, except in the sense in which the act of writing is itself an instance of action—which, of course, is not what Gaynesford's account suggests or aims to establish. While in the Chaucer example it is unproblematic to recognize the deed done—the dedication of a certain poem to someone—some other examples that Gaynesford uses might not work quite as easy. Consider his treatment of Douglas Dunn's poem 'Arrangements':

And here I am, closing the door behind me,
Turning the corner on a wet day in March.

As Gaynesford argues, "the line-break acts like a corner to be turned, thus enabling the utterance to do precisely what it says" (101). However, it seems strange, if not utterly impossible, that an act of saying does the job of turning the corner, independently of the line break. In other words, it is the act of walking that makes one turn the corner, not the act of saying that one is turning the corner (or an act of inserting the line-break in the appropriate place in the poem). The most that these two lines do is describe what the poet is doing, but they are not doing the deed (i.e. the act of turning the corner) itself. In that sense, even if 'what is stated is done', this still does not count as an instance in which poetic utterance has in fact committed any kind of action (other than that of describing). The question then remains for the reader to decide whether this is an instance of an ill-chosen example, or whether we should demand more in terms of criteria which turn *some* (as Gaynesford rightly emphasizes) poetic utterances into actions.

Perhaps such criteria would be available if more was said about questions two and three identified above. Namely, if poetic utterances are a form of action, what precisely is the deed done or brought about via these actions? In some cases, as with Chaucer, it is the one of dedicating a poem to someone. However, even assuming the plausibility of categorizing such poetic utterances as a form of action, what are the implications of that categorization for our understanding of poetry? In other words, does the fact that some poems are dedicated to someone, or that some poets invoke the help of the Muse or manage to perform some such action via their verses, justify the acceptance of the 'poetry as action' paradigm, or does it merely point to the (another) interesting way in which language works in *some* poems?

An answer to this question is, arguably, suggested by Gaynesford's interesting analysis of Shakespeare's sonnets. This analysis gives the impression that what is in fact done, the action that is triggered by the composition of a poem, is better located in the workings of the poem, i.e. in the way in which it initiates (philosophical) reflections in the read-

er. Bluntly put, what the poet does, on this interpretation, is not only dedicating his poem to someone, but a more substantial act of causing his readers to undergo certain experiences. After all, poetic encounters leave us with the sense of having undergone some kind of emotional and intellectual experience—for example, that of recognizing and appreciating, potentially even engaging with, the sceptical worries underlying Shakespeare's sonnets, or, to suggest our example, of sensing the pain and disappointment of a speaker who urges us 'Never to give all the heart' in Yeats' famous poem of that title, and then of considering whether one would indeed renounce the possibility of passionate love in light of the poem. This line of thinking about the attunement is in line with the criteria Gaynesford himself emphasizes: in order for poetry to be serious, poetic utterances have to exhibit commitment and responsibility. In other words, one has to be capable of doing what one says. More elaborately, "those responsible for poetic utterances must be able to count as such in a deeper sense than mere causal efficacy. It must be possible and actual for them to commit themselves in saying what they do. Hence it must be possible and actual for them to be, and to be held to be, responsible in what they say." (110)

This criterion will naturally raise the bar for what counts as *serious* poetry, i.e. which instances of poetry might count as serious (even if it does not help us account for what is for something to be poetry). When Yeats (if indeed Yeats it is, rather than the lyrical subject) urges us 'Never to give all the heart', and enlists rather persuasive arguments for such a statement in his poem, are we to take him seriously, or are we to enjoy the particular way in which the rhythm and rhyme work together to make this poem an aesthetic delight? Would he himself commit never to give up all the heart? Would he, let us wonder, repudiate his own advice had he but had a chance for happiness with his long desired Maude Gonne? Another problem that arises from embracing the 'responsibility and commitment' criterion relates to the fact that Gaynesford's account presupposes some type of intentionalism on the part of the poet to do certain acts—namely those for which he is willing to take responsibility. But, as numerous critics of intentionalism have pointed out, it is not necessarily so that poetry is to be considered, appreciated and evaluated according to the standards provided by the intentionalist framework.

Some poets of course do commit and can be held responsible for what they are saying. To consider their poems as an instance of an action, rather than as true (or false) array of statements referring to the real world, is a plausible move, if by action one has in mind a kind of intellectual activity that takes place in the readers' mind in the 'after-life' of a poem (as Peter Kivy might put it (Kivy 2006)), or that inspires poets to turn to particular issues and write about them. When Kant talks about poetry 'animating the mind' (Kant 2000, for a discussion see Šustar and Vidmar 2016, Vidmar 2018, Vidmar forthcoming), he might think of some such understanding of the ways in which poetry

does things to us, in addition to moving us via the sheer power of its aesthetic qualities. Consider much of religious poetry or various instances of metaphysical poetry. Robert Frost's repeated questioning into the moral status of natural creatures and men's relation to the world, satisfy, we think, not only the claim that poetry can be an action, but exemplify a poet committed to that what is stated in his writings and willing to take responsibility for such actions, even if not always using Chaucer-type of utterances. At best then we can conclude that, as usually the case with philosophical theories, Gaynesford's account works for some, but not for all poetry, and does not cover all instances of poetic creation.

What then to conclude regarding the connection between poetry and philosophy? Certainly, Gaynesford has a point in stating that the attunement approach challenges our understanding of both, poetry and philosophy. To understand the way in which Shakespeare manages to develop a view on the passing of time or to envision sceptical concerns makes a demand on scholars to reconsider ways in which philosophy can be conducted, as well as the limits of poetic engagements. On the other hand, philosophers such as John Gibson or Peter Lamarque might nevertheless insist on the futility of attunement, each for his own reasons. Gibson could argue that even if poetry is a form of action, its ties to philosophy are not established, given that the two disciplines do not entwine but remain separated by the mere diversity of their methods. Lamarque, himself a fervent opponent to approaching poetry from the standpoint of the truth debate, might argue that attending to the way in which Shakespeare develops a sceptical view is not to be evaluated by philosophical but literary/aesthetic criteria.³ Consequently, nothing much is gained in terms of developing a more elaborate account of poetry *generally*, by appreciating philosophical considerations of *some* poems. It is not clear, to us at least, that Gaynesford's account would seem convincing to someone who shares Gibson or Lamarque's concerns. What is convincing though is his plea for taking poetry seriously and to continue analysing its ties to philosophy.

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³ In arguing this, we are taking cues from Gibson 2017 and Lamarque 2009.

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