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Environmental hermeneutics and the meaning of nature

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Environmental hermeneutics is a relatively recent stance within environmental philosophy and environmental ethics. The starting point of an environmental hermeneutics is the idea that the world that humans inhabit is always already interpreted and infused with meanings. Human understandings of and encounters with environments are informed and molded by preexisting narratives — individual and collective, factual and fictional accounts of (encounters with) environments and of memories thereof. Hermeneutics starts from the assumption that people make sense of their lives by placing themselves in a larger normative context of texts and other meaningful things. An *environmental* hermeneutics will focus on the fact that environments matter to people too, because environments embody just such contexts.

Environmental hermeneutics is built on the insights and theories from hermeneutics in general. Hermeneutics began as a legal and theological methodology governing the application of law, and the interpretation of Scripture, and developed into a general theory of human understanding through the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey. Martin Heidegger developed hermeneutics into a fundamental philosophical perspective, which was worked out by Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur and others. Philosophical hermeneutics is the philosophical theory that claims that the quest for understanding is a fundamental characteristic of human existence. Hermeneutics is often focused on the understanding and interpretation of written texts, but its scope is more general and includes all those elements in the world that somehow convey meaning and yet require interpretation: literary texts, but also works of art, human actions and possibly even environments and landscapes. *Philosophical hermeneutics* is usually distinguished from hermeneutics as referring to different qualitative methods in social environmental sciences. In contrast, philosophical hermeneutics is not so much a method, but rather a fundamental perspective on

human existence and human understanding.¹ As such, it is generally considered one of the important strains of 20th century continental philosophy.

Environmental hermeneutics examines the role of interpretation in human relations with environments, but often combines this fundamental philosophical perspective with more empirical approaches. As such, it is part of the broader field of environmental humanities, examining concrete cases of human-environmental relationships, making explicit the role that different interpretations of environment play in these relations, and showing how conflicting interpretations of environment are intertwined with different notions of personal and social identity.

This chapter presents and discusses some key thoughts and ideas from philosophical hermeneutics and reflects on how these might bear on environmental philosophy. Special attention is paid to some central concepts in the works of Gadamer and Ricoeur, two key thinkers for the development of philosophical hermeneutics. It is important to note, however, that this chapter merely presents elements of their work that might be relevant to contemporary environmental hermeneutics.

Philosophical hermeneutics as a fundamental perspective on human understanding.

Philosophical hermeneutics starts with the idea that humans are essentially interpretative beings. Humans seek to understand meaning through interpretation, and this is not some accidental feature, but rather it is distinctive of humans. The world we inhabit is a reflection of this interpretative character: we live in a world that is always already interpreted. The phrase ‘always already’ refers to the notion that we are immersed in a lifeworld and a language that predates us; the meanings that our life is intertwined with have an origin that lies before us, and cannot be fully appropriated by us.

Effective history and historically affected consciousness

Historically, one early strand of hermeneutics, emerging from Friedrich Schleiermacher’s and Wilhelm Dilthey’s work, advocates that understanding the meaning of a text amounts to knowing the intention of the author. This so-called ‘romantic hermeneutic’ view on meaning and interpretation has been famously criticized by Gadamer. According to Gadamer, texts can mean both less *and* more than was intended by the author — less because the author may

¹ In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer explicitly argues that ‘truth’ and ‘method’ are at odds with one another.

have all sorts of idiosyncratic associations with his texts, more because texts typically afford more than one reading. Moreover, to “understand what a person says is [...] to come to an understanding about the subject matter, not to get inside another person and relive his experiences.”²

In contrast, Gadamer insists that all understanding is historically situated and thus historically shaped. Our understanding is always inescapably embedded in particular historical circumstances in a way that cannot be made fully transparent to ourselves. “In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. [...] *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.*”³

Rather than trying to liberate our understanding from preconceptions, hermeneutics stresses that preconceptions should be considered almost like transcendental ‘conditions of understanding’. It is our very belonging to a specific historical tradition that enables us to discern meanings in the first place. We are a part of the tradition in virtue of which certain things can present themselves to us as being significant and meaningful. We are always already situated in the ‘*hermeneutic circle*’, in which the meanings we seek to understand are always already speaking to us. It makes no sense to ask what the ‘true’ or objective meaning of a particular experience would be besides the cultural interpretation because this question itself would be nonsensical: we always already live in an interpreted world.

From within our place in an ongoing history, certain ‘texts’ present themselves to us as somehow important and meaningful, yet, what this meaning is exactly is not yet clear to us. Whenever we try to understand the meaning of a transmitted text through interpretation, the historical ‘horizons of meaning’ and our contemporary understanding enter a dialogue in which we seek to understand the text but also gain new perspectives on ourselves. Gadamer calls this mutual transformation between text and interpreter that takes place within such a continuous dialogue, a *fusion of horizons*.⁴ Understanding is less like grasping the content than like engaging in a dialogue — the ‘dialogue that we are’, says Gadamer. Understanding is aimed at an expanding horizon of meaning: through interpretation we come to understand the meaning of what at first appears alien, and participate in the production of a richer, more

² Gadamer 1989, p. 385.

³ Gadamer 1989, p. 278.

⁴ The fusion of horizons does refer not so much to the way that two interpreters find a common understanding, but rather that in the fact that through the activity of interpreting meaning we gradually get introduced to the broader horizon of meanings that already pre-exist in the history of interpretations we find ourselves in. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 305.)

encompassing context of meaning — and by doing so we gain a better and more profound understanding not only of the ‘text’ but also of ourselves. Each understanding ultimately always includes self-understanding, indeed self-encounter.

Understanding does not just repeat historically transmitted meanings, but implies entering into a dialogue with them. According to Gadamer, the basic rule for hermeneutics is to “reconstruct the question to which the transmitted text is the answer”.⁵ The world somehow present itself to us as being significant and meaningful, what exactly it does mean is still in need of articulation, and each particular interpretation of the meaning will inevitably be parochial, i.e. shaped and determined by the particular historic situation in which we find ourselves. Whenever we understand and interpret a text, history is effectively working through us; this is known as ‘effective history’ (*Wirkungsgeschichte*). But our understanding of the meaning of the world will inevitably always also be ‘closed’. Hermeneutics reflects on this always particular understanding of meaning and self, shaping our understanding, not only by allowing it to understand more, but also by making it more aware of its finitude, of the particularity of every understanding. The awareness of the fact that one belongs to a interpretation history that one cannot fully appropriate leads to what Gadamer calls ‘historically effected consciousness’ (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*). The realization of the historically contingent and finite nature of one’s own understanding which urges for an openness towards other interpretations. “The soul of hermeneutics,” Gadamer famously said, “consists in the possibility that the *other could be right*.”

The dialectic of distantiation and appropriation and narrative identity

The fact that our understanding is always dependent on and shaped by the contingent historical and cultural context surrounding us does not mean we are imprisoned in that context. We may find that we have gotten stuck with stories and interpretations about our world that have been told before, petrified interpretations, or fixed narratives that do not always properly articulate the actual meaning that these places have for us now. In these cases, we will not always be able to adequately articulate what that new meaning actually is. Gadamer points out that temporal distance can sometimes help to solve the critical question of hermeneutics: confronting our own understanding with others — from other times and other cultures as transmitted through literature, art, monuments — can make us more aware of the contingent character of the historical particularity of our preconceptions, can help us reflect

⁵ Gadamer 1989, p. 367

on the strengths and weaknesses of our own interpretation, and can trigger a willingness to revise our interpretations if they prove to be untenable or too restrictive.

Paul Ricoeur (in close dialogue with Gadamer) has developed this critical hermeneutics, based on a close analysis of the relation between readers and texts. He points out that the issue of interpretation comes into play as soon as a text “emancipates from its author” – when spoken language is transformed into a *text* (“any discourse fixed by writing”⁶) that assumes a life of its own. Whereas a speaker can accompany his signs and explain himself, the author is absent from the text. Without an external authoritative source to turn to, a reader can only revert to reading the text to discover its meaning. Ricoeur argues that this model of understanding texts provides a model for our all those instances in which we interpret things that present themselves as significant, but are not self-explanatory and therefore require interpretation.⁷

Ricoeur points out that interpretation of texts require active part of the reader. Unlike in a case of living speech, where a speaker can point to the things in the ‘real’ world that both speaker and interlocutor are part of, a text does not so much point to, or represent the world, but rather *presents a world*. To grasp this imaginary world, the reader therefore has to play an active interpretative role, using the context of his own life to fill the gaps in the text’s references. Understanding not only requires an openness to the world as presented by the text, but also a willingness to ‘place oneself’ – for the time being – in that world. Understanding a text means to be involved, to be ‘present’ in the act of reading, to actively participate in the world of the text, to use the context of one’s own life to ‘bring to life’ the world that is being brought forward by the text, bring to bear the meanings of words and concepts that play a role in his own life (*‘appropriation’*). This does not mean that we should project our own beliefs and prejudices onto the text, but rather, that we “let the work and its world enlarge the horizon of the understanding which I have of myself”.⁸ Good reading requires ‘appropriation’, but also requires an openness for the ‘strangeness’ a text (*‘distantiation’*) on the part of the reader, and a willingness to abstract from the context of one’s particular life. Hermeneutic interpretation is ultimately aimed at understanding texts that “speak of possible worlds and of possible ways of orienting oneself in these worlds”.⁹

⁶ Ricoeur 1981, p.146

⁷ Ricoeur 1973.

⁸ Ricoeur 1981, p.178.

⁹ Ricoeur 1981, p.177.

Ricoeur argues that, in order to prevent such hermeneutic interpretation from being an all-too-easy appropriation of the text, a mere projection of our prejudices, a *critical* hermeneutic interpretation should do justice to the text, by first taking seriously the text as a network of signification that is closed in on itself.¹⁰

According to Ricoeur, the world of the text provides the reader with the means of constructing a notion of a sustained self, a *narrative identity*. Our culture provides us with a body of narratives — our holy texts, our dearest works of literature and art, and so on — that give us words and storylines with which we can tell ourselves who we are and what our life is about. As narrative beings, we know ourselves *through* the stories that are being told (*emplotment*). If the reader answers to the ‘invitation of the text’, then the ‘refiguration of the world by the text’ can bring about an active reorganization of the reader’s being-in-the-world. By reading and interpreting ‘texts’, and imagining oneself in the meaningful worlds that are being opened by these texts, one gets to know ‘oneself as another’¹¹. One’s narrative identity is thus shaped by the opening horizon of new worlds that are being disclosed by texts and other meaningful things.

Hermeneutics and environmental philosophy

As a general theory of human understanding, philosophical hermeneuticists can be applied to specific issues concerning our interpretation of and relation to environments. *Environmental hermeneutics* starts out from the assumption that the world we live in always already has significance because it is always already infused with meanings. It therefore explores what it means to interpret environments, how environments can become meaningful to us, and how certain interpretations of the environment support certain interpretations of oneself. Moreover, environmental hermeneutics also stresses that in order to grasp the full meaning of a particular place, one has to get involved in a process of interpretation. For that reason, many works in environmental hermeneutics tend to combine fundamental philosophical reflection with concrete case studies. Specifically, hermeneutics calls for a critical reflection on more current forms of environmental ethics. A typical hermeneutical environmental *ethics* will not start with a reflection on or identification of abstract values that people should adhere to. Rather, it will reflect on actual existing relationships with and experiences of an environment, examine

¹⁰ This is the reason why Ricoeur stresses the importance of a structural analysis of language. Cf. ‘What is a text?’, Ricoeur, 1981, p. 145-154.

¹¹ Ricoeur 1992

the narratives in which the different interpretations are expressed , and it will seek to understand what they disclose about self-understandings and environmental identity. For example, it will show how “the lumber company’s view of woodland as ‘lumber’ and ‘resource’ might be bound up with a frontier narrative of conquering an unruly wilderness and using it for the benefit of human ‘progress’”, or how “the perspective on woodland as leisure or recreation (e.g., as a site for one’s summer cottage) can take place within a narrative of original innocence (original unity with nature), fall (artificiality of modern technological society), and periodic release from big city life (weekends at the cottage)”.¹²

Hermeneutics and anthropocentrism

Hermeneutics maintains that meanings only exist within the context of human understanding. Thus, even the use of the phrase the ‘meaning of nature’ may be misleading, for it suggests that ‘meanings’ can exist independently of understanding. Meaning is not an object, or a feature of the objective world that understanding sets out to ‘grasp’. Moral experiences of nature and moral meanings of nature come into play as soon as *we* start articulating our relationship with the world. In this process, we transform the neutrality of space into a meaningful *place*, that is, through interpretation we make mere ‘Umwelt’ (environment) into a ‘Welt’ (world), that is: into a meaningful and inhabitable world that we can live in, to use a phrase of Ricoeur.¹³ Yet, from a hermeneutic perspective, the meanings we encounter in the world are no secondary addition to an otherwise ‘objective’ reality, but rather *form the very fabric* of the kind of world that matters to us.¹⁴

Environmental hermeneutics sees humans as essentially meaning seeking beings. Its prime object is human understanding; it focuses on the meaning nature has *for us*. This might suggest that hermeneutics is human-centered and can therefore never provide a model for an adequate environmental ethic. However, if we take anthropocentrism to be the view that believes that the value of the natural world is determined at will by humans, then surely an environmental hermeneutic will *not* be anthropocentric. Hermeneutics believes that moral meaning exist within human understanding, but the process of interpretation is not a process of *constructing* but rather of responding to an experience of meaning.

Meanings have to be articulated in response to experiences of the world in which the

¹² Van Buren 1995, p. 260.

¹³ Ricoeur 1991, p. 149.

¹⁴ This is even true for scientific interpretations: the world of science is the world as it is (made) intelligible to us through the scientific perspective.

world presents itself as somehow meaningful, though usually, at first it is not clear what particular meaning is trying to present itself. Meaningful (moral) experiences do have to be actively appropriated, and interpreted as part of a complex, integral web of references. But the world we live in is an always already interpreted world, it presents itself as other and confronts us with issues that we have to acknowledge in our interpretations of the world. Understanding the meaning of an environment is a never ending process, not just because we constantly discover new means of ‘extracting information’ from a text (in this case, a particular place), but also, and more importantly, because the meaning of environments is always transcendent, and only shows itself in an ongoing conversation about who ‘we’ are and what the world is to ‘us’. We do not always already fully know *what* they have to say to us; but we feel their appeal to us: these places present themselves as significant and beckon to be understood and interpreted — ‘what is it about this place?’ The world outside exists, and throws its questions at us, it has a meaning that beckons to be understood but never fully can.¹⁵

Hermeneutics and place

Moreover, environmental hermeneutics is critical of philosophical attempts to ground a sense of ethical value in nature that exists ‘objectively’, independent of moral understanding. From hermeneutic perspective, the very idea that meaning can exist outside the realm of human understanding and interpretation is by itself incomprehensible. What is at stake in issues of meaning is ultimately tied to understanding and thus a — historical — *human* perspective.¹⁶ This hermeneutic perspective also has consequences for environmental ethics. According to one representative view, human beings are not born ethical, but “gradually become informed about moral expectations that implicitly instruct us through culture, our institutions, our historical tradition, and the geographical places within which we are situated. In that sense,

¹⁵ Drenthen 1999.

¹⁶ Of course, this notion of human is not a biological but a philosophical one. Meaning is tied to the perspective of a historical beings that it ‘suspended in language’, beings that are capable of understanding. Note that there is a relevant difference between human understanding of meanings, and the kind of understanding that humans share with other animals. Animals understand the world as correlate of their sensory apparatus; they understand functional relationships between their own sensory existence, and their surroundings. Conversely, their communication forms consists of ‘exchanging signs that represent aspects of their relationship to their environment. Human understanding of meaning, in contrast, transcends this mere ‘instrumental’ relationship. Human interpretations do not *represent*, but rather *present* a world; and thus they transform mere environment (‘Umwelt’) into a world ‘that one could inhabit’ (Ricoeur 1991, p.149).

ethical discernment is less a matter of intellectual construction than it is one of attunement to a particular way of being-in-place”.¹⁷

From a hermeneutic perspective, environmental ethics must therefore focus on the moral meanings and ethical commitments that people have to concrete environments. For this reason, many environmental hermeneuticists focus in the meaning and the development of an *ethics of place* (e.g. Casey 1993, Smith 2001).¹⁸

Such a view on environmental ethics differs greatly from other forms of environmental ethics that tend to seek ethical guidelines for dealing with the environment in abstract notions such as ‘intrinsic value of nature’ or ‘ecocentric egalitarianism,’ concepts meant to help people to leave behind anthropocentrism, ‘speciesist rationality’ and ‘human chauvinism’. From a hermeneutical perspective, such an approach to the human perspective is deeply mistaken, because it presupposes a displaced, disembodied, and a-historical view of our being-in-the-world, that will eventually transform people into the very abstract beings that such a theoretical perspective presupposes. This focus on particular places is one of the reasons why environmental hermeneutics has been open to the empirical approaches of social environmental sciences from the early start of the field. As a qualitative method in social science, hermeneutics has played a role in social geography, architecture, archaeology and environmental history, mostly as a method for social scientists to articulate people’s different environmental understandings in concrete places. Especially in philosophy of architecture and philosophy of geography, one finds strong emphasis connecting these social science perspectives with philosophical reflections from phenomenology and hermeneutics.

As early as 1989 an edited volume appeared that — although mostly phenomenological in focus — also featured a few environmental hermeneutic contributions on dwelling, place and environment.¹⁹ In 1995, Robert Mugerauer published a pioneering book that aimed to systematically introduce scholars from environmental studies, architecture, cultural geography and others fields to the perspective of phenomenology and hermeneutics.²⁰ This book examined concrete case studies that showed how perceptions of landscapes and

¹⁷ Stefanovic 2000, p.128.

¹⁸ It should be noted, that the failure to find a meaningful relation to the places is an important topic for environmental hermeneutics. The uncanny (e.g. Trigg 2012) refers to the finitude of human’s ability to make sense of places, but also the notion of wilderness has been interpreted as a critical border concept (e.g. Drenthen 2005).

¹⁹ Seamon & Mugerauer 1989.

²⁰ Mugerauer 1995.

places evolved from earlier religious, secular, and scientific thought. Only in recent years can one find more explicit attempts to elaborate *philosophical* hermeneutics into an alternative approach to environmental philosophy and ethics, up to the point that one can speak of a ‘newly emerging field’.²¹

Environmental hermeneutics compared to other approaches

Philosophical hermeneutics is built on the assumption that people make sense of their lives by placing themselves in a larger narrative contexts; *environmental* hermeneutics focuses on the fact that environments matter to people too, because environments embody just such contexts.²² In recent years, many environmental philosophers have argued for an approaches more sensitive to issues of meaning, narrative, and history. O’Neill, Holland and Light have criticized the dominant ‘itemizing approach’ to environmental values²³ in favor of a more historical account that does “more justice to the kinds of concern that appeals to biodiversity and sustainability are attempting to capture.”²⁴ Similarly, King has argued for a ‘contextualist’ view on the moral status of nature because “both the intelligibility and persuasiveness of ecocentric concepts and arguments presuppose that proponents of these ideas can connect with the narratives and metaphors guiding the expectations and interpretations of their audiences.”²⁵ Against this backdrop, the recent emergence of environmental hermeneutics can be seen as part of a broader movement in environmental philosophy.

In order to focus somewhat more on the specific nature of the *hermeneutical* perspective, it can be useful to compare it to similar approaches in environmental philosophy.

Hermeneutics shares a common interest with social constructivist environmental philosophers in studying conflicting interpretations of environment. A typical constructivist will claim that nature itself does not exist but is merely a social construction, a mere ‘projection’ onto intrinsically meaningless and valueless objects²⁶, and will tend to argue that conflicts between interpretations should be primarily analyzed from a politically angle. In

²¹ Clingerman et al 2013.

²² “We make sense of our lives by placing them in a larger narrative context, of what happens before us and what comes after. [...] Particular places matter to both individuals and communities in virtue of embodying their history and cultural identities. Similar points apply to the specifically natural world” (O’Neill, Holland & Light 2008, p. 163).

²³ O’Neill, Holland & Light 2008, p.167.

²⁴ O’Neill, Holland & Light 2008, p.168.

²⁵ King 1999, p.23.

²⁶ Evernden 1992, Rolston 1997, Keulartz 1998, and Peterson 1999.

contrast, an environmental hermeneuticist will instead argue that while it is certainly true that meanings cannot exist unless there are agents (humans) in the world, there is no reason to think that meanings exist only in our minds. As Ricoeur holds, hermeneutics is a way of learning how to deal with such conflicts of interpretations.²⁷ Confronted with conflicts of interpretation, hermeneutics does not just take note of the different interpretations in a debate, but it also attempts to stage a conversation between these interpretations, a dialogue in which both parties open themselves to coming to an agreement about the matter itself (*die Sache*²⁸), aimed at finding appropriate interpretations that do justice to the ‘text’.

A hermeneutic approach to environmental conflicts of interpretation will attempt to reconstruct and articulate the ethical experiences that underlie the different interpretations of environments, following the basic hermeneutic rule that one should “reconstruct the question to which the transmitted text is the answer”.²⁹ It will then examine how the acknowledgment of the interpretative nature of our understanding of the environment and the re-articulation of the normative motives in the terms hermeneutics can help further the ethical debate. It is in this vein that John van Buren has argued for a “critical environmental hermeneutics”.³⁰ He argues that hermeneutics should, on one hand, help understand and make explicit deeper epistemological, moral and political ideas at stake in actual conflicts of interpretations regarding the environment, but more importantly, on the other, it also has a critical role to play in environmental ethics, by providing criteria with which one could determine the adequacy of particular environmental interpretations.³¹

A critical hermeneutic analysis of an environmental conflict might reveal that the actual moral conflict is elsewhere as most conflicting parties think. For example many conflicts on concerning restoration, that appear to be about empirical issues, actually involve “meaning of particular places and how we, both as humans in general and inhabitants of a local area, need to relate to nature and to very specific places.”³²

A critical environmental hermeneutics will not only articulate and make explicit those interpretations and meanings that are already at work in our everyday practices, bring them to

²⁷ Ricoeur, 1974.

²⁸ Gadamer 1989.

²⁹ Gadamer 1989, p. 367.

³⁰ Van Buren 1995.

³¹ Van Buren (1995) distinguishes four criteria for adequacy of an environmental interpretations: 1. biophysical, 2. historical, 3. technical and 4. communicative ethical-political criterion.

³² Deliège & Drenthen 2014, p. 109.

light and make them explicit, but also confront existing meanings and interpretations with other, less obvious ones. Doing so will increase our sensitivity for the many different meanings that can be at stake in our dealings with a particular place, although it will also make the questions of ethics even more complex than they already are.

Another close relative within environmental philosophy is so-called environmental phenomenology.³³ Hermeneutics and phenomenology share a common interest in ‘rescuing the phenomena’. Both aim to increase openness to experiences and to other perspectives, and provide a space to articulate the kind of meanings at play. Yet, there are also some important differences. Whereas certain environmental phenomenologists will stress the virtue of clearing away one’s presuppositions, hermeneuticists will emphasize the importance of having presuppositions and stress that each understanding of the world will inevitably be ‘closed’ in a specific historic shape. From a hermeneutic perspective, our understandings of the meaning of nature will always be provisional contributions to an ongoing conversation, attempts to articulate a meaning that presents itself to us.

Seen from this perspective, an environmental hermeneutic will be critical towards the suggestion by some phenomenologists that one could have an undisturbed, unmediated understanding of the environment. Abram, for instance, grants that “there can be no complete abolishment of mediation, no pure and unadulterated access to the real” but suggests that “there’s a wildness that still reigns underneath all these mediations—that our animal senses, coevolved with the animate landscape, are still tuned to the many-voiced earth.”³⁴ From a hermeneutic perspective, however, meanings of nature only exists within the realm of cultural interpretations, within a historical tradition of interpretations, a dialogue between texts and readers that all revolve around the question of meaning.

Recent contributions to environmental hermeneutics

Recently, several ideas from the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur have shown to provide fresh new starting points for thinking about a wide range of issues in environmental philosophy and ethics. Environmental hermeneuticists have shown that humans do not just understand themselves through texts and narratives, but also through the meaningful places they find themselves in. For that reason environmental hermeneutics has

³³ E.g. Brown & Toadvine 2003; Foltz & Frodeman 2004; James 2009.

³⁴ Abram 2010, p. 264.

been suggested to complement Ricoeur's notion of emplotment with a notion of emplacement.³⁵ Ricoeur's approach to narrative identity is proposed to be useful for understanding what can be called 'environmental identity', that is, the way environments provide us with a context with which to understand ourselves.³⁶ Environmental hermeneutics is used as a critical theory to think through and open up dominant environmental narratives, for instance the dominant technocratic approach to landscape management, or the all-too-naive romanticism of certain urban wilderness narratives.

The idea that landscapes can be considered as multi-layered texts that afford different readings and therefore support different environmental identities and complex ethical relations to environments and places, can provide a framework for thinking through ethical dimension of conflicts of land management. Conflicts about rewilding in cultural landscapes, for instance, often involve a clash of ethical positions that *read* the landscape differently. Those who oppose rewilding out of a concern for cultural heritage landscapes and the identity that are based on those landscapes, typically refer to top relative recent legible features of a landscape. In contrast, many of those who believe that we have an obligation to 'rewild' our landscapes, seek to restore a much older historic continuity, and as such refer to a much deeper legible layer in the landscape palimpsest. Both readings articulate different moral meanings that complement each other.³⁷

Hermeneutics has also shown to provide a fresh perspective on issues in environmental virtue ethics and narrativity,³⁸ to be helpful in thinking through issues of environmental justice,³⁹ and to contribute to thinking about urban environmentalism and the ethics of care for monuments and heritage landscapes.⁴⁰

Environmental hermeneutics can play both a constructive and a critical role in environmental philosophy and ethics. It can be constructive in the sense that it can help moral understanding to find new articulations and interpretations that more adequately give voice to the moral experiences that underlie any of our relations with the natural world, by reflecting on cultural sources and confronting dominant interpretations with alternative ones. It can be critical in the sense that a hermeneutical reflection on the nature of our understanding of

³⁵ Clingerman 2004.

³⁶ Utsler 2009.

³⁷ Drenthen 2009, and Drenthen 2011.

³⁸ Treanor 2008.

³⁹ Utsler 2009.

⁴⁰ E.g. Trigg 2012.

nature will not only show us alternative modes of understanding, but also make us more aware of the contingent character of our particular understanding of nature. By confronting contemporary understandings with others that have been handed over to us through history — in the form of texts, narratives, works of art, but also actions, events and even landscapes — hermeneutics confronts contemporary understanding with other possibilities and thereby helps us to deepen our understanding, while at the same time making us more aware of the provisional character of each attempt to pinpoint the meaning of things. In other words, the hermeneutic approach invites one to open a dialogue, to a broadening of perspectives, and to the fusion of horizons in our understanding

An environmental hermeneutics will start with the recognition that the interpretations of the places in which we live in turn provide an ongoing and ever-changing narrative context from which we can understand ourselves. By explicating the interpretational base of our being-in-the-world and articulating those pre-existing meanings and interpretations that already play a role in how we act and think, hermeneutics will force us to have a second look at the meanings we often take for granted. A hermeneutical environmental ethics will articulate and make explicit those interpretations and meanings that are already at work in our everyday environmental practices, and will confront existing meanings and interpretations with other, less obvious interpretations. Doing so will increase our sensitivity to the many different meanings that can be at stake in dealing with the environments we inhabit, although it will also make the questions of ethics even more complex than they already are.

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