

# Interpreting Nature

The Emerging Field of  
Environmental Hermeneutics

EDITED BY

*Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor,  
Martin Drenthen, and David Utsler*

Fordham University Press

| New York 2014

Copyright © 2014 Fordham University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Fordham University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Fordham University Press also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Interpreting nature : the emerging field of environmental hermeneutics / edited by Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor, Martin Drenthen, and David Utsler. — First edition.

pages cm. — (Groundworks: ecological issues in philosophy and theology)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8232-5425-5 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8232-5426-2 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Human ecology—Philosophy. 2. Hermeneutics. I. Clingerman, Forrest, editor of compilation.

GF21.I58 2014

304.201—dc23

2013004643

Printed in the United States of America

16 15 14 5 4 3 2 1

First edition

# Introduction

## Environmental Hermeneutics

*David Utsler, Forrest Clingerman,  
Martin Drenthen, and Brian Treanor*

Friedrich Nietzsche famously stated: "There are no facts, only interpretations."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this could be slightly rephrased: no facts go uninterpreted. There are simply no bare facts, at least if a fact is to be meaningful. Every fact has meaning only in relation to other facts, to context, and to the human understanding itself. In other words, at the heart of every confrontation of concept and perception is the issue of *hermeneutics*: the art and science of interpretation.

The present volume uncovers some of the ways that interpretation takes place in the human relationship to the environment. This collection brings together essays on the questions that hermeneutics raises for environmental philosophy. In the public sphere, much of the focus on "the environment" is concerned with discovering scientific facts and then reporting how policy can act on these facts. On its face, philosophical hermeneutics might appear to be an unrelated enterprise. But this volume follows Nietzsche in arguing that even the facts of the sciences are given meaning by how humans interpret them. Of course this does not mean that there are no facts, or that all facts must come from scientific discourse. Rather, one point of agreement among the essays presented here is the need for mediation—the mediation that grounds the interpretive task of connecting fact and meaning through a number of different structures and forms. This has practical implications, not simply intellectual ones. Ostensibly bare facts are contextualized by a variety of individual and social relations, and responsive actions emerge as a matter of consequence. For example, the science of the human body may seem to be only a collection of factual data, but what someone

does with that data (or the ignorance of the data) in terms of habits, behaviors, and practices all reflect interpretations that involve value and meaning. Already then we can see how philosophical hermeneutics recommends itself to the topic of the environment: *philosophical hermeneutics offers a unique reflection on the human mediation of the meaning of environments, and, equally, hermeneutics assists in understanding the practical implications of our encounters with the world.*

### Defining the Place of Environmental Hermeneutics

Throughout this volume, the term "hermeneutics" balances between a broad and a narrow meaning—both meanings are often operative in the individual essays collected here. To explain, it is helpful to be reminded of the place of philosophical hermeneutics as a tradition within philosophy. In a narrow sense, the present volume is interested in the specific tradition of discourse called "philosophical hermeneutics"—a modern dialogue over the nature of interpretation that begins with Schleiermacher and is carried into contemporary philosophy through figures such as Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Habermas, and Ricoeur.<sup>2</sup> This school of thought emerged from more general concerns with how to understand texts—before the modern era, most theorizing about the task of interpretation was concerned with the proper understanding of the Biblical text (Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* might thus be considered the ancient ancestor of philosophical hermeneutics). From this background, the historical trajectory of modern philosophical hermeneutics can be explained simply: it is an investigation that began with a narrow concern around understanding the authorial intent of written texts, and gradually moved toward the recognition of the inevitable interpretation of our historical, factual existence itself.

But hermeneutics has a broader sense as well, which is sometimes also employed here: Hermeneutics is commonly defined as the reflection on the "art and science of interpretation," not simply of written texts, but as a form of thinking itself. Most broadly, the question of interpretation is not merely asking about a technique for discerning a single meaning or finding one interpretation that is the right one. Nor is it concerned simply with the imposition of meaning on an object by a subject, making any interpretation possible and, therefore, acceptable. As Robert Mugerauer noted in his 1995 book,

*Interpreting Environments*, hermeneutics is a matter of "finding the valid criteria for polysemy within the fluid variety of possibilities."<sup>3</sup> This statement also reveals an inherent critical element in hermeneutics. Not all interpretations are valid; but there is more than just one valid interpretation possible, and interpretation is a structurally open project that never comes to final closure. Hermeneutics aims at opening all possible worlds, for our encounter with the world is always already rendered through our interpretations of it.

In light of both narrow and broad meanings, what exactly is *environmental* hermeneutics? The answer to that question is as multivalent as the notion of philosophical hermeneutics itself. "Environmental hermeneutics" includes a number of different, often-overlapping possibilities and approaches, among them the following.

1. Environmental hermeneutics is *the extension of principles of interpretation to environments of any kind (natural, built, cultural, etc.)*. This definition is both abstract and wide-ranging. As a result, hermeneutics is a rationale and framework for interpretive activity in general, whether that interpretation is done by visitor, inhabitant, botanist, artist, farmer, architect, construction worker, or someone merely looking out a window.

2. Environmental hermeneutics is *the interpretation of actual encounters of or within environments*. Most often this type of interpretation is meant to deepen our understanding of places with which we have direct interaction—hence the near omnipresence of case studies and concrete examples in essays engaging environmental hermeneutics. Examples of such interpretation include informational signs at nature preserves or historical markers, both of which convey the interpretation of "experts" for the benefit of visitors. But indirectly, this would also include activities such as the construction and development of walking trails, which assume a certain relation to the landscape.

3. Environmental hermeneutics refers to *a form of nature writing*. Archetypal examples include Aldo Leopold, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Annie Dillard, among others. This is perhaps a more personalized account of the previous category. Both in the respect that nature writing is an interpretation of nature by the author (referring back to the encounter in the second definition) as well as the interpretive action of the reader of the text concerning nature. This also can include the notion of the ways in which nature can be grasped or experienced in the text.

4. Environmental hermeneutics provides accounts of *the approach of various disciplines to environments*. Environmental hermeneutics, therefore, can be genuinely interdisciplinary in scope. Different disciplines interpret the natural environment in different ways according to their own internal logic. Thus, there are geological interpretations, economic interpretations, technological interpretations, agricultural interpretations, and on and on it goes. Environmental hermeneutics can critically mediate between different disciplinary interpretations so as to suggest a fuller and more robust understanding of environments.

5. Perhaps in its most robust sense, environmental hermeneutics is *a philosophical stance which understands how the inevitability of what Gadamer called our "hermeneutical consciousness" informs our relationship with environments*. This final sense of environmental hermeneutics is concerned not simply with techniques to interpret landscapes but with the ontological framework that necessitates such interpretation. This presumption of environmental hermeneutics, it should be noted, is implicit throughout the present collection.

These five possibilities are not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, there are certainly other possibilities of connecting interpretation and environment. As environmental hermeneutics is further developed and explored, many other aspects are sure to emerge. For example, the sciences, theology and religious studies, leisure studies, and other fields provide additional perspectives for environmental hermeneutics.

In the present volume, each of these five approaches are at least in passing touched upon; however, it is the fifth approach that suggests the cohesion of this collection. For the editors and authors, this offers a working definition of environmental hermeneutics found at the intersection between philosophical hermeneutics and environmental thought. This area of study has variously been called "ecological hermeneutics," "ecohermeneutics," "environmental hermeneutics," "hermeneutics of place," "hermeneutics of landscape," and "biological hermeneutics."<sup>4</sup> What tie all of these conceptions together are the intersections where philosophical hermeneutics (in both the narrow and broad meanings described previously) comes into contact with environmental thinking. So those working in environmental hermeneutics may address any number of a wide variety of topics involving natural entities and ecosystems; land- and

seascapes; wild, rural, or urban environments; and indeed any other conceptions or meanings of "environment" where interpretation is involved.

### Interpretation as the Ground of Environmental Philosophy

Environmental hermeneutics offers a fresh way of looking at traditional problems of environmental philosophy and environmental ethics—areas of discourse that hitherto have not been influenced by philosophical hermeneutics to any great degree. Rather than simply debating the nature of nature or whether it exists, for example, hermeneutics offers the possibility of pondering and reflecting upon the experience in environments as a form of interpretation. Environmental hermeneutics offers an implicit critique of many forms of environmental philosophy, in other words, based on the idea that ". . . there is no unmediated encounter with nature."<sup>5</sup> Because of this, environmental hermeneutics advocates mediation as the appropriate stance for any environmental philosophy. On one hand, many early works of environmental philosophy advanced arguments that rely on essentialist notions of "nature," "wilderness," or similar terms in order to advocate specific ethical positions (what might be considered a first, ethically oriented wave of environmental philosophy); human responsibility in relation to such idealist notions seems a shadow of lived experience, however. On the other hand, a more recent, second wave of environmental philosophy advances a social constructionist or phenomenological notions of nature. While this overcomes the difficulties of a reified and essentialist notion of "nature," it is in danger of ignoring the reality of a world outside human determinations of meaning. It also underdetermines the complexity of the reflexive nature of encountering the meaning of nature itself. In contrast, environmental hermeneutics concentrates on the "conflict of interpretations" that exists in our intersubjective encounters with the material, emotional, and intellectual world. For hermeneutics, the issue is not a binary of a pure-versus-constructed encounter with the environment. Rather, hermeneutics is interested in understanding the mediated experience, the in-between place characterized by detours that result from our historically situated place of human finitude.

Not only does environmental hermeneutics offer a mediated perspective, it thereby also expands the concerns of environmental philosophy. Philosophical hermeneutics encounters the world in a

variety of ways, and thus environmental hermeneutics applies to myriad contexts. The title *Interpreting Nature* might seem to indicate hermeneutics aims at what is commonly referred to as the "natural environment." Of course, this is already problematic. As many debates within environmental philosophy and related disciplines reveal, "pure" nature, free from human intervention, does not exist. Further, even the definition of what "nature" is in the first place is not understood univocally. This hinders debate: For example, without a consensus on the meaning of nature, environmental thought becomes mired in discussions of dualisms such as the nature/culture divide and the acceptable place of anthropocentrism versus non-anthropocentrism. As the editors and authors of this book see it, environmental hermeneutics encompasses a much broader understanding of environment. An environment may refer to a physical environment, sociocultural environment, a built or architectural environment, or virtually any other way an "environs" can be construed. From this understanding, it is possible to take a stance that acknowledges the difficulties of defining nature and the natural environment, and thereby open up space for a productive dialogue in response to these aporias.

But isn't hermeneutics about the methods of textual interpretation? What does hermeneutics have to do with interpreting nature? The present collection is not an attempt to argue that past hermeneutic philosophers are in truth environmental activists; but only an inattentive or fragmented reading of hermeneutical philosophers, especially Gadamer and Ricoeur, would lead one to conclude that contemporary philosophical hermeneutics is limited to actual texts. Contemporary hermeneutics rests on Heidegger's "hermeneutics of facticity," and there has long been a strong interest in questions of existence and meaning. In the foreword to the second edition of his monumental *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer employs Heidegger's "temporal analytic of Dasein" to indicate that "understanding" (or interpretation) is not one way of being but is "the mode of being of Dasein itself. . . ."6 Therefore, for Gadamer, hermeneutics ". . . denotes the basic being-in-motion of Dasein that constitutes its finitude and historicity, and hence embraces the *whole of its experience in the world.*"7 Without question, our experience in the world includes that of environments. One might even argue that "environmental hermeneutics" is redundant insofar as all hermeneutics is concerned with experience in the world, which is already always environmental.

While we wish to preserve a broad inclusive understanding of environmental hermeneutics (in order to be able to address specific environments among the plurality of environments), the intersection of hermeneutical thinking with environmental thought and contemporary environmental concerns requires that we maintain the distinction. Otherwise, we risk reducing decades of hermeneutics to the contemporary insights and meditations that have led to a relatively new field. The primary point is that hermeneutics is not reducible to the interpretation of texts. Rather, that "the text" can be seen as a model for what hermeneutics is aiming at, which is the interpretation of experience in the world. What happens when we encounter a text reflects the realities of what happens in experience in general.

This is one reason that both Gadamer and Ricoeur noted repeatedly that philosophical hermeneutics is not primarily concerned with the intention of an author. In the case of a text, the work takes on an autonomy that permits it to possess many valid meanings apart from the author. The reader, or interpreter, brings her own "horizons" to the text and, in the encounter, may have those horizons expanded. Or, with regard to the inherent prejudices of the horizons, may have her horizons entirely obliterated as a new understanding of the world emerges, and as a consequence change, one hopes, for the better. What we begin to see is that the experience one has with a text bears many of the features that one has in almost any encounter in the world. Of course, our experience of the world is not identical with our experience of written texts. For instance, we may have "direct" and powerful bodily experiences of the world we find ourselves in. What environmental hermeneutics will stress, though, is that as soon as we ask what these experiences *mean* to us, we are confronted with the same issues as when we ask what a particular text has to say to us. Given this stance, environmental hermeneutics proceeds from an understanding of hermeneutics which draws on the work of both Gadamer and Ricoeur.

While the present collection acknowledges the distinction between philosophical hermeneutics in general and environmental hermeneutics in particular, both do share an important trait: hermeneutics is dialogical. In his editor's introduction to Gadamer's *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, David E. Linge writes, "Hermeneutics has its origin in the breaches of intersubjectivity. Its field of application is comprised of all those situations in which we encounter meanings that are not immediately apparent but require interpretive

effort."<sup>8</sup> These "breaches of intersubjectivity" begin in what Gadamer refers to as experiences of alienation between an I and thou that are joined together by common experience or a "deep common accord," which makes communication possible and out of which arises understanding.<sup>9</sup> While there are limits to the notion of "the breaches of intersubjectivity," our interest is in hermeneutics as it is located in the "in between" of "strangeness and familiarity," that place between the distanced, alienated object and the interpreter. Hermeneutics operates in this "intermediate position."<sup>10</sup>

This dialogical structure might seem to pose a problem, however, for environmental hermeneutics. After all, since we can't have verbal communication with natural entities that do not possess language, isn't the possibility of a (hermeneutic) relationship ruled out? Our wager is that it is not, because the stance of hermeneutics remains one of mediation. On one hand, humans provide the "language of nature," through descriptions and interpretations that are shared within the human community. Thus what started as an environmental hermeneutics in truth becomes a dialogue within culture *about* nature. But on the other hand, what becomes clear later in *Truth and Method* is that, for hermeneutics, language does not always refer to only human language but rather to "any language that things have."<sup>11</sup> While it is true that philosophical hermeneutics has primarily been concerned with human language and therefore human discourse, language can also refer to the presentation of a being from itself to others. For environmental hermeneutics, the intermediate location of hermeneutics is the place where meaning is discovered beyond the binaries and dichotomies between humans and "nature" that have long obfuscated much environmental thinking and from which environmental philosophy has not been able to completely free itself.

The nearly generation-long debates over anthropocentrism and the various non-anthropocentrisms have often failed to define these terms and almost completely ignored that multiple understandings are possible. For example, is all anthropocentrism about the value of humans? Can anthropocentrism be understood as epistemic? Are there ecocentric and biocentric aspects to being human? Are human beings so "other" than nature that there is nothing natural about us at all? Or are we perhaps a kind of nature? With certain exceptions, of course, much environmental thinking falls into a paradigm of a human/nature divide, which in its more extreme forms is simply another dualism. When they fail to recognize the complexity and

complementarity of their respective positions, both anthropocentrists and non-anthropocentrists fall into patterns of thinking that both assume and reinforce this dualism. Acknowledging the conflict of these different interpretations, however, leads us to see that there is a complex interweaving of all beings that really isn't well explained or understood when reduced to simple binaries.

In addition, environmental hermeneutics may also offer something else to contemporary environmental discourse—a way to apply theoretical understanding in a manner that makes a difference. In other words, if the purpose of environmental philosophy in general and a concern of environmental hermeneutics in particular is to address itself the real-world environmental crises that we face, then it cannot be merely abstract or theoretical. We would argue, to borrow from J. Baird Callicott, that environmental hermeneutics is no doubt a form of environmental activism.<sup>12</sup> Gadamer makes a forceful argument that hermeneutics is fully about the “real world” and not an abstraction. “The principle of hermeneutics simply means that we should try to understand everything that can be understood.”<sup>13</sup> And the “what” of understanding is not found in abstract concepts but in actual encounters in the world. The very universality of hermeneutics is present in the experience of the world from where the meanings of those experiences obtain.<sup>14</sup> Hermeneutics actually works from and within concrete, historical realities and is thus intended to speak to those same realities and “real-world” situations. Thus, Gadamer can say that “we consider application to be just as integral a part of the hermeneutical process as are understanding and interpretation.”<sup>15</sup> Understanding, interpretation, and application—taken together as a “unified process”—are important features of environmental hermeneutics. We think environmental hermeneutics, if it is to mean anything at all, should matter! This is where environmental hermeneutics has a close affinity with eco-phenomenology. Environmental hermeneuticists and eco-phenomenologists contend that philosophy can and must motivate for concrete change, in defiance to certain aspects of modern day “green speak” that suggest we can have our cake and eat it, too, and leaving the future of the environment to “green” consumption.<sup>16</sup>

And concrete change can only occur when philosophy examines the world concretely. Rather than remain at the level of abstract discourse, environmental hermeneutics is concerned with both interpretation per se and lived particularities—something seen in this volume by the use of and reference to numerous and varied case

studies. Because hermeneutics, as noted previously, characterizes the being-in-motion of Dasein and is about the entirety of experience in the world, it only makes sense that case studies provide a prime locus for hermeneutical reflection. Moreover, what we are calling "environmental hermeneutics" focuses upon the dialogical relationship between humans and environments, which is likewise well expressed by the attention to case studies. Holding to the claim at the beginning of this introduction that no facts are left uninterpreted, hermeneutics takes the data of case studies in order to uncover meaning and unveil understanding.

Environmental understanding is contextual understanding. It does not find itself in abstract space but is situated in concrete places or locations, and always within the particular cultural setting belonging to that place. Moral meanings do not exist *in abstractum*, but only as part of moral language and within the constant flow of interpretation and reinterpretation that we call traditions. Without active debates and disputes about the meaning of environments, that is, without a vivid culture and a vivid moral tradition (conversation or dispute about transmitted interpretations), moral meanings cannot exist, and moral culture becomes numb. Hermeneutics in general seeks to articulate and reflect upon the (moral) understandings of a historically situated moral community; an *environmental* hermeneutics focuses on the "emplaced" situatedness of a given understanding of the environment. By explicating and critically reflecting on an "emplaced" understanding of the environment, environmental hermeneutics is not primarily a theoretical endeavor but truly practical philosophy: critically reflecting on our practices and our understanding of the environment, articulating dormant meanings that have remained hidden from view, opening new avenues of interpretation. Doing so means that hermeneutics matters: It helps to deepen and broaden our moral environmental understanding of the place-based context of a given moral community, and in a sense helps *create* a culture of place. Hermeneutics, in other words, helps to create moral communities by breathing life into our moral language.

One example of such concrete prescriptions is the field of environmental justice, to which environmental hermeneutics is more than congenial. If environmental justice teaches us anything, it is that environments mean nearly everything to us as human beings—our health, our culture and way of life, individual and collective identities, traditional knowledge and practice, and so forth are all woven into our emplacement (we would even say our embodiment)

in environments. Secondly, environmental hermeneutics pertains to the way environmental justice issues play out in terms of activism, law and policy making, and communicative reason amongst all players. To the former, environmental hermeneutics addresses itself on the theoretical plane to understanding the human relationship to environments in terms of the concerns of environmental justice. This should be evident by what has already been said in this introduction, and additional insights can be found throughout this volume. In terms of activism and the "realities on the ground," environmental hermeneutics provides resources for deliberation and creative means for thinking through problems. Thus the potential links between environmental hermeneutics and environmental justice offer broad horizons for future research and scholarship.

### The Literature of Environmental Hermeneutics

The remarkable diversity and variety of essays in this volume reflect this wider understanding of environmental hermeneutics as an "emerging field" within environmental philosophy in particular and environmental thought in general. In fact, *environmental hermeneutics might be thought of as the "third stage" of environmental philosophy*. Emerging out of classic texts by luminaries such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold, the first works in the field were almost exclusively oriented toward applied ethics. In other words, the first stage of environmental philosophy saw the field as a topic within applied ethics, and the issues discussed reflected this narrow concern. While these were foundational, a second stage of thinking about the environment emerged: one that recognized the fecundity of intellectual questions beyond ethics. Scholars working on aesthetics, ontology, theology, and other disciplines brought these questions to bear on environmental issues. A greater diversity of philosophical methods was used, and, in particular, the continental philosophical tradition was engaged in the dialogue. Among other things, this second stage both globalized the dialogue as well as opened up the fundamental question of how humans are "in the world." This provides entry to what we believe is a third stage of environmental philosophy. Increasingly philosophers are confronted with the "conflict of interpretations" on issues of environment. Acknowledging the need to better understand how we understand our environments, environmental philosophy has recently begun to address questions of how environments are

mediated in our intellectual, moral, and perceptual experience. The essays on environmental hermeneutics that make up this volume are, we hope, harbingers for many fruitful discussions that are beginning to arise.

By characterizing environmental hermeneutics as a new stage of environmental philosophy, it is important to recognize the work already done by philosophers on this issue. Don Ihde has been credited by many for applying the term "hermeneutics" to environmental concerns, and his works are among the earliest in the field. Likewise, the work of Robert Mugerauer and John Van Buren has influenced several of the essays collected here. While it cannot claim comprehensiveness, the bibliography appended to this volume is meant to be a starting point to explore relevant literature already in print. What these earlier foundational works coupled with the appearance of the essays in this volume suggest is that the role of hermeneutical thinking in environmental philosophy and other environmental discourses is coming into its own.

Prior, of course, to earlier works that set the stage for the field of environmental hermeneutics is the foundation of philosophical hermeneutics itself. The editors and authors of this volume would not limit or restrict the field of environmental hermeneutics to any particular articulation of hermeneutical thinking or specific thinkers. Our hope is that environmental hermeneutics as an emerging field will continue to be elucidated from a wide spectrum of hermeneutical thinking, past and contemporary. But the collective exposition of environmental hermeneutics in this volume owes a significant debt to Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer (and in a somewhat lesser way, Martin Heidegger). Ricoeur, in particular, with his work on such themes as narrative, identity and selfhood, the conflict of interpretations, and memory, just to name a few, has provided the authors of this volume with a rich field of hermeneutical tools with which to construct an interpretive matrix for environmental philosophizing. While it is true that *Interpreting Nature* is not a book about Ricoeur and environmental philosophy, it is certainly the case that Ricoeur, along with Gadamer, has greatly influenced philosophers—including the editors of this volume—who set out to explore the intersection and interfacing of philosophical hermeneutics and environmental philosophy. We would contend that environmental hermeneutics offers environmental philosophy completely new worlds of thought and expression not previously available to it, in order to address the increasing complexity of environmental challenges facing the world

today (see, for example, the final essay in this volume by Paul van Tongeren and Paulien Snellen). Hence, we have proposed environmental hermeneutics as a third stage of environmental philosophy.

### The Genesis of *Interpreting Nature*

One of the unique features of this volume is the means through which the collection came into being. The four editors became acquainted through the discovery of a shared interest in the intersection of philosophical hermeneutics and environmental thought. This included what might very well be considered the beginnings of a tradition for environmental hermeneutics: many common philosophical texts, concern with similar questions, and shared vocabulary. What followed was a long period of communication and dialogue that encouraged the notion of environmental hermeneutics as a distinct field within environmental philosophy and complementary to other philosophical approaches to environmental philosophy.

After a number of meetings at conferences and email communications, it became apparent that the progress of thought in environmental hermeneutics called for a collection introducing it as an "emerging field." The question quickly became "how to proceed?" One option was to invite potential contributors to simply write essays and collect these into a volume. Such an approach is cost-effective, but the disconnectedness of the resulting contributions was deemed by the editors to be contrary to the idea of environmental hermeneutics itself: We must be attuned to the dialogical nature of hermeneutics and the "fusion of horizons" to which Gadamer refers. What would be much preferred is a colloquium where potential contributors could present their work and interact with others so that all could be mutually enriched and challenged in our distinct but related philosophical inquiries into environmental hermeneutics. The prospect of such a gathering seemed next to impossible, especially in an environmentally responsible manner. In the first place, how to get all the contributors together in one place at the same time? Multiple schedules and additional commitments, not to mention the question of funding, presented serious obstacles to bringing such a group together. Moreover, we were confronted with the aporia that constantly haunts academics with environmental commitments: that countless miles are traveled and resources are consumed, vastly multiplying one's carbon footprint, in order to give a twenty-minute presentation about saving the environment!

The deliberation of the editors concerning these issues brought about the idea of "virtual" seminars. This fulfilled the desire for a shared virtual space/place at the same time, without the difficulties of funding, scheduling, or environmental costs. Thanks to the graciousness of Ohio Northern University (home institution of one of the coeditors, Forrest Clingerman), which provided the use of their technological capabilities, an ongoing virtual seminar took place over the 2010–2011 academic year. Throughout the fall and spring, one or two seminar sessions were held each month, attended by a core group of fellow contributors. Each seminar was devoted to one paper, sent out beforehand. At the virtual seminar, the author was given a few minutes to offer some introductory remarks before a brief response from another of the contributors, who acted as a designated respondent for the purpose of focusing the discussion. This was followed by a lively discussion by the rest of the group, usually lasting over an hour. The virtual seminars allowed for a live video and audio feeds of upward of sixteen persons. This format permitted open dialogue and debate within this little virtual/cyber community that aided all participants in crafting a more polished version of their contribution. It also established an ongoing intellectual discussion, which we hope will extend beyond the publication of this volume.

In the end, the virtual seminars did not replace all of the dynamics of typical conference. After all, our spirited discussion of actual places was occurring in virtual space, which meant we could not continue this discussion over a shared meal or coffee, as might have been the case otherwise. However, the seminars did provide their own unique dynamics, something that grew more apparent each month as the seminars progressed. This virtual space led to a significant intellectual engagement with each other; essays were read with more depth and seriousness, and later papers were influenced by earlier ones. That is to say, the community and the liveliness of the intellectual connections made through this process were substantive and meaningful in ways that recommend the process. It is the hope of the editors and contributors that what started as an experiment in the construction of this volume can promote a model that others will use in the future, especially those working in environmental philosophy and other such related disciplines.