

A Review of *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics*

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Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor, Martin Drenthen, and David Utsler (editors), *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics*. Fordham University Press, 2015, 400 pp., \$40.00 (pbk). ISBN: 9780823254262

The purpose of this book is to make a significant contribution to the task of establishing environmental hermeneutics as a distinct branch of environmental philosophy broadly construed. The essays in this book connect themes in hermeneutics such as narrative, history, identity, and temporality, with concerns of environmental philosophy such as preservation, the relation between human habitations and natural environments, and the definition of nature. The major philosophical inspirations for the book are Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur; readers familiar with these thinkers will find themselves in familiar territory. The editors do a fine job of introducing both hermeneutics in general and environmental hermeneutics in particular so that readers with only a little familiarity with environmental philosophy or hermeneutics will be well served. The argument of the book

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as a whole is that environmental philosophy may be benefited by an interpretive approach. For example, problems in environmental philosophy place nature and human beings in opposition to each another; by contrast, a hermeneutical approach does not focus on binary relationships but on dialogical relationships. The book argues that one of the primary benefits of hermeneutics to environmental philosophy is normative or ethical; environmental hermeneutics is normative because it both reflects on and negotiates between different interpretations or narratives about the natural world.

The book is divided thematically into four parts: Part I: Interpretation and the Task of Thinking Environmentally; Part II: Situating the Self; Part III: Narrativity and Image; Part IV: Environments, Place, and the Experience of Time. While different essays deal with some themes more than others, the common denominator in all of these essays is their concern with hermeneutics as applied to environmental philosophy. I will organize the rest of my review around the following major themes: narrative, identity, place and temporality, nature and anthropocentrism, and finally ethics. I will look at selected essays that address the given theme rather than give a detailed report on every essay in the book.

NARRATIVE

Narrative, one of the central notions of hermeneutics, is a theme that runs through all of the essays in the book in one way or another. John van Buren shows how narrative may function in an environmental hermeneutics. Narratives—stories with a beginning, middle and end—are the moving parts of any hermeneutic or interpretive project.¹ Van Buren uses the problem of how we should regard and care for forests as an example to illustrate how a “critical environmental hermeneutics” negotiates between various narratives or stories about the forest (27). The forest is a “text” about which we can tell various narratives or interpretations; we may interpret the forest variously as “land,” “life,” “lumber,” or “leisure” (Van Buren 22–23). Since the story we tell about the forest will have consequences for how we wind up using the forest, it is necessary to establish the criteria on the basis of which we can determine which story has the most “truth value” (Van Buren 27). Van Buren provides four

¹ John van Buren, “Environmental Hermeneutics Deep in the Forest,” 19.

criteria. The first is biophysical; we should opt for the narrative that best fits the biophysical world to which the narrative corresponds (29). The second is historical; this criterion asks which narrative best fits the historic tradition (of a territory, etc.), taking into consideration whether or not the tradition is morally questionable (Van Buren 30). Third, we may use technical or pragmatic criteria; this questions which narrative will work best or is most efficient. Finally, we may use “communicative ethical-political” criteria; “communicative ethical-political norms” are “procedural norms” suitable for rational discourse in a democratic society, for example, equality, free discussion, and tolerance (Van Buren 32). It is unclear, however, that the procedural norms of a democratic society (which, given his examples, seem to be the values and rights of a democratic society) are properly speaking criteria for choosing between narratives. Perhaps he means that we should choose a narrative that is in harmony with democratic values, in which case, it does not seem that very much is gained. Insofar as land, life, lumber and leisure are alternative narratives about the forest, they appear to be indifferent to whether one also holds to democratic values.

Van Buren further argues that critical environmental hermeneutics splits the difference between objectivism, a merely positivistic view of nature on the one hand, and radical relativism on the other, which in this case seems to mean that any narrative is as good as another (33–34). Critical environmental hermeneutics negotiates between these two extremes and discovers the relative “truth-value” of various narratives (Van Buren 27). While van Buren’s essay is meant to be descriptive and not prescriptive, he does not make clear what he means by truth-value—an all-important descriptive term. If we are trying to determine which narrative about the forests (or any other territory or environment) has the most truth-value, surely what we are really doing is determining which narrative is the best, and best for what or best for whom—e.g., environmentally best for the territory in question, or best in terms of gathering needed resources for the human beings living in or around it. Determining what is best requires prudence; unfortunately, any discussion of that virtue is conspicuously absent from his discussion of critical environmental hermeneutics.

Brian Treanor argues that narrative (Treanor’s rendering of *poiesis*) complements both *theoria* and *praxis*, understood as science and

experience respectively, in our efforts to gain knowledge of nature.² The problem with *theoria* or science alone is that scientific accounts are too abstract, while the problem with *praxis* or direct experience of nature is that it is often impractical (Treanor 198). Narratives, or narratives of a certain kind at least, are salutary because they may make us more concerned for the natural environment (Treanor 188). This was the effect, for example, of John Muir's accounts of Yosemite and the High Sierras (Treanor 197). While the claim that certain narratives about nature complement both scientific accounts and one's personal experiences in nature is correct (and perhaps self-evident) as far as it goes, Treanor does not make it clear why this must be grounded in the claim that human beings are narrative beings or that all experience is mediated (183). Philosophical anthropology does not seem to be the decisive factor in Treanor's claim about nature narratives.

IDENTITY

The self—what it is, how identity is constructed—is a theme that runs through many of the essays. The argument of the book is that the self is constructed hermeneutically or interpretively; thus we may think of the self as a complex system of changing and changeable narratives. Robert Mugerauer, David Utsler and Nathan Bell are all concerned with how the self relates to the environment or nature. Mugerauer articulates a version of the hermeneutical self in a process he styles 'layering,' which names the dynamic—and thus fluctuating—relation of an individual with her environment.³ Our "open character" lies in "the interactive and continuous layers of the dynamic unfolding of our micro- and macro-environments" (Mugerauer 66). Dynamic interactions of internal and external elements constitute everything from cellular structures to human habitations. Landscapes are always shifting via sedimentation and other natural processes; the human body is continuously replacing the cells that constitute it; likewise, the self is not a stable phenomenon (Mugerauer 65). In the case of the self, it is always being made and remade by ourselves and the natural environment(s) in which we find ourselves (Mugerauer 80). One is not sure where the analogy between human beings and, say, landscapes, begins and ends. I think that is because Mugerauer is not

² Brian Treanor, "Narrative and Nature: Appreciating and Understanding the Non-human World," 182.

³ Robert Mugerauer, "Layering: Body, Building, Biography," 66.

being poetic but literal; the process of layering, whether in a human being or in a landscape, is the same process. The problem with the argument of the essay is that it is not an argument *for* the hermeneutical self; rather one must have decided in advance that human beings are constituted by layers and by the process of layering, that is, one must have already endorsed the hermeneutical self.

In a psychological vein, David Utsler argues that “environmental identity in environmental psychology and ecopsychology is a psychological ‘environmental hermeneutics of the self.’”⁴ This is a particularly heavy-laden statement. Environmental psychology examines the relation between human beings and their environment; ecopsychology joins psychology and ecology so that the needs of the planet and the needs of the person are understood to exist on a continuum (Utsler 133). Utsler is concerned with “environmental identity” and that it is a part of human identity, yet it remains unclear precisely what my or anyone else’s environmental identity is (Utsler 139). Consequently, it is not much help to say that environmental identity is an “environmental hermeneutics of the self” (Utsler 124); specifics would be helpful in this regard. For example, is my environmental identity that part of me that feels pleased when I go for a walk in the woods? Or is it that part of me that does not want those woods to be cut down? Is it necessarily true that my environmental identity (whatever it is) is discovered or constructed hermeneutically through therapy? A further difficulty is that Utsler does not justify his methodology. Why is the therapeutic motivation for being in nature the privileged case, the case that provides environmental identity? It is methodologically questionable to take the exceptional case rather than a more typical case for one’s standard. There are a great many reasons we might want to go into nature; perhaps we like to fish, or we like bird watching. Surly peace of mind would be a likely and salutary consequence or side-effect of these and similar activities.

Dylan Trigg also privileges the exceptional case. Taking up the common criticism of Heidegger, namely that he leaves out embodied-ness in his account of mood, Trigg argues that mood is bodily, and in particular that the mood of the agoraphobic suggests to us that the concept of ‘home’

⁴ David Utsler, “Environmental Hermeneutics and Environmental/Eco-Psychology: Explorations in Environmental Identity,” 124.

is central to interpreting bodies inasmuch as home is not as such a place in the world but a relation to that place.⁵ While it is true enough that I must have certain feelings for a place in order for that place to be home for me, this is a conclusion that I arrive at on the basis of common, everyday experience. It is methodologically suspect to appeal to the experience of the agoraphobic to make the same point. Why is the atypical case the standard? If it is or should be, what is the argument for that? The reader is left to wonder.

PLACE AND TEMPORALITY

Several authors discuss in various ways the connection between place—as opposed to space—and time. David Wood articulates the difference between space and place in the following way: place is “location...permeated with meaning” while space is geometrical and measurable.⁶ Forest Clingerman argues that “a hermeneutics of place, among other things, presents an interpretive structure through which to understand time’s depth in place.”⁷ By distinguishing between the “anonymous present” and the “meaningful depth of the present,” Clingerman makes ‘depth’ the operative visual metaphor (247). The temporal ‘depth’ of the self is realizable through a hermeneutics of place. The end result of such a hermeneutics is not simply a better theoretical understanding of place together with the salutary effect of living with more awareness and appreciation for the places in which we find ourselves, but also normative or ethical; in this regard, Clingerman’s example is that a hermeneutics of place will lead one to reject crass consumerism as a mode of living (263). This is one desirable end for any normative ethics, but it does not seem plausible that an interpretation of various places will provide guidance on the thornier questions of both environmental ethics and ethics in general.

Janet Donohoe addresses a concern similar to Clingerman’s, namely that a hermeneutics of place has ethical consequences. Donohoe argues that a hermeneutics of monuments should understand monuments as being between the ‘eternal’ or the permanent and the ‘temporal’ or the vanishing present, and thus a hermeneutical approach to monuments

⁵ Dylan Trigg, “Bodily Moods and Unhomely Environments: The Hermeneutics of Agoraphobia and the Spirit of Place,” 176.

⁶ David Wood, “My Place in the Sun,” 281.

⁷ Forest Clingerman, ““Memory, Imagination, and the Hermeneutics of Place,” 246.

would reduce “their ideological power without denying their role in transmitting to us a tradition.”⁸ Donohoe’s piece has the virtue of making a hermeneutics of place concrete. The conclusion, however, amounts to the claim that one can have one’s cake and eat it too, so to speak. On the one hand, a hermeneutics of monuments will reduce the ideological power of monuments, while on the other hand also transmit to us a particular tradition. But how is this possible, when reducing the ideological power of monuments precisely requires us to undermine the tradition that the monuments communicate? The problem that both Donohoe and Clingerman (rightly) recognize, however, is in Clingerman’s words, “the fact that contemporary Western society lives in the present, shorn of temporal depth” (263). One reason for this, I suggest, is that we have been cut off from tradition(s). To put it mildly, a hermeneutical approach to place or to monuments lends itself better to the critique of tradition rather than the reclamation of tradition (hermeneutics is, after all, a critical activity). Hence a hermeneutical approach to monuments or to ‘place’ in general would not rectify but rather exacerbate the problem of our disassociation with tradition.

‘NATURE’ AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

Is there such a thing as ‘nature’ or ‘pristine nature’? We might take one of at least two views on this matter: either the ‘natural world’ is real and qualitatively distinct from human nature—and thus distinct from human environments (habitations, building, institutions, artifacts, etc.)—or the human world, artifacts and all, is just as much a part of nature as anything else, thereby placing ‘nature’ and ‘human nature’ on a single continuum. If we accept the latter view, then one consequence is that the concept of ‘nature’ becomes unnecessary, for nature typically designates the non-human. W. S. K. Cameron, however, argues that we must retain the concept of nature for three reasons.⁹ First, it is politically potent; second, it enables us to express common scientific truths, and third it plays a vital role in naming that which we want to preserve or restore (120). The status of the concept of nature raises the concern of how we are to regard nature;

⁸ Janet Donohoe, “The Betweenness of Monuments,” 265.

⁹ W. S. K. Cameron, “Must Environmental Philosophy Relinquish the Concept of Nature? A Hermeneutic Reply to Steven Vogel,” 120.

one way of regarding nature that most if not all of the authors in the volume agree is deleterious for environmental philosophy is anthropocentrism. An anthropocentric view is any view that places human beings at the pinnacle of the natural world, or otherwise regards human beings as the privileged part of nature. This is deleterious according to environmental philosophy because, so the argument goes, it encourages a hubristic attitude toward nature. While environmental philosophers want to embrace, say, ecocentrism or biocentrism as an alternative, the dilemma, as Christina Gschwandtner puts it, is “the fact that it is the *human* who continues to speak and to articulate even the biocentric or ecocentric position.”¹⁰ In other words, biocentrism or ecocentrism are just different forms of anthropocentrism. We can only view the world from the human perspective. Paul van Tongeren and Paulien Snellen put the problem slightly differently: since hermeneutics takes, and must take, the human point of view, how do we apply environmental ethics to the non-human world when we can never have a perspective outside of the human? They rightly conclude that some anthropocentrism is unavoidable.¹¹ Besides being impossible, escaping the human view (if that were somehow conceivable) would result in the cessation of all feelings of care and affinity for the natural world.

Sean McGrath provides a very interesting if ultimately unfeasible solution to the problem of anthropocentrism. The title appropriately echoes Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology,” for McGrath tries to salvage Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit*, Heidegger’s solution to the problem of viewing nature solely under the mode of calculation, manipulation and control. One critique of *Gelassenheit* is that it involves a hopelessly romantic view of nature; instead, McGrath argues that one may conceive of *Gelassenheit* as the attitude toward the whole taken by hermetic cosmology (hermeticism meaning the alchemical view of the cosmos).¹² McGrath rightly argues that the direction taken by early modern science was to quantify nature for the sake of dominating and controlling nature; an alternative approach, or as he puts it, an “alter-modern” approach to nature, is hermetic cosmology (202). For the alchemist, the material

¹⁰ Christina M. Gschwandtner, “Might Nature Be Interpreted as a ‘Saturated Phenomenon?’” 100.

¹¹ Paul van Tongeren and Paulien Snellen, “How Hermeneutics Might Save the Life of (Environmental) Ethics,” 311.

¹² Sean McGrath, “The Question Concerning Nature,” 202–3.

cosmos is the mediator of the divine mind; thus hermeticism provides a holistic view of nature (McGrath 216-217). While hermeticism is radically anthropocentric (the purpose of the practice of alchemy is the divinization of the alchemist) it views nature or the cosmos in an entirely non-hubristic attitude; accordingly its attitude toward the whole may be characterized as something like *Gelassenheit*. In this way hermeticism offers a unique (and also peculiar) solution to anthropocentrism in environmentalism. The problem with this solution is that like astrology, most people nowadays would not take the claims of hermeticism seriously. We may want to view nature in the manner of the alchemist, with something like *Gelassenheit*, but at the end of the day we put our faith (at least with regard to environmental challenges and concerns) in facts gleaned from science, not in the dubious results of alchemy. We cannot forget, let alone undo, the discoveries made possible by mathematical physics, with the result that we cannot ever entirely abandon the view of nature as quantity.

A HERMENEUTICAL ETHICS

Many of the authors in this volume suggest that a hermeneutical ethics is both possible and desirable. Paul van Tongeren and Paulien Snellen address precisely this issue. Tongeren and Snellen endorse Bernard Williams's arguments that traditional philosophic ethics (e.g., virtue ethics, deontological ethics and utilitarianism) is limited and ultimately unable to provide a robust normative ethics.¹³ They go on to argue that a hermeneutical ethics is the best alternative to philosophical ethics. A hermeneutical ethics must have four key aspects. First, "[hermeneutical ethics] should give an adequate explanation of the interpretive nature of ethical experience."¹⁴ Second, following Williams, this reflection should account for the fact that there is no starting point outside of the interpretation of ethical experience (Tonerger and Snellen 305). Third, ethical theories that suppose themselves to be starting outside must be re-interpreted as being from within ethical experience (Tonerger and Snellen 307). Finally, a hermeneutical ethics "does not reduce the plurality of ethical experience but rather aims at enriching it" (Tonerger and Snellen

¹³ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana Press, 1985).

¹⁴ Tonerger and Snellen, "How Hermeneutics Might Save the Life of (Environmental) Ethics," 305.

308). In this context, *enriching* is just a shade away from *expanding*. Is their overall suggestion that a hermeneutical ethics would seek to expand the range of permissible actions and activities for human beings? It would seem so. A hermeneutical ethics will limit its normative claims, and further, precisely because of its interpretive character, will not be normative in the same sense as “the ‘moral system’” (Tonergren and Snellen 308). Tonergren and Snellen, however, anticipate the charge of crude moral relativism. In response they argue that a hermeneutical ethics is still normative, but only so in the sense that we should be constantly testing our opinions against those criteria that our opinions presuppose; those criteria, in turn, should also be tested and confirmed or refuted ((Tonergren and Snellen 309). On the basis of this characterization, it would seem that hermeneutical (re)evaluation of opinion would yield provisional normative claims and not absolute normative claims. Thus hermeneutical ethics is robust relativism; from the perspective of hermeneutics that is not a liability but an asset.

Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics lives up to its name in spades. Collectively and individually, the authors take a hermeneutical approach to nature and to environmental philosophy. Readers who endorse philosophical hermeneutics will find much to be pleased with in this book. But for other readers, questions remain. Where does science end and hermeneutics begin? Is there a clear line between the two? Should environmental science make such an easy alliance with philosophical hermeneutics particularly when the latter has the power to interpret and perhaps even manipulate the data given us by science? Where does interpretation end and manipulation begin? Is not interpreting nature another form of dominating nature? How has the technological domination of nature made possible the thought that nature is yet another field encompassed by the gaze of hermeneutics?