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Interpreting the Natural Environment. Paul Ricoeur's Directions for an Eco-Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Abstract: Interpreting the Natural Environment. Paul Ricoeur's Directions for an Eco-Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Human being occupies a special place in nature as interpreting being. By focusing on the interrelation between human being and the natural environment, this essay considers the possibility of extending Paul Ricoeur's thought in the direction of environmental hermeneutics. Through reference to his hermeneutic phenomenology, this paper aims to discuss the complex bond between humanity and the natural sphere as one of passivity and activity. I begin with a broad framing of the possible encounter between Ricoeur's oeuvre and environmental philosophy, and then turn to his phenomenology of embodiment, considering it as offering the basic features for the elaboration of what I will call an eco-hermeneutic phenomenology. These reflections will lead to examine the interplay of belonging and distanciation in the relationship between human being and the natural environment, and to open up the discussion of the hermeneutic dialectic of being-situated, situating and resituating ourselves in nature.

Keywords: Nature, Environment, Environmental Hermeneutics, Interpretation, Phenomenology.

In the contemporary global society, the lifeworld – i.e., the world of everyday life and commonsense realities (see Husserl 1982) – appears as profoundly troubled by environmental issues such as climate disasters, ecological destruction, desertification, ozone-layer depletion, and different types of urban and environmental pollution. Environmental problems, which greatly vary among communities, and the related questions concerning the protection of the natural environment, are high-level national and international concerns. As harmfully affecting all human and non-human forms of life, the current environmental crisis requires our attention like it has never done before. We are strongly reminded, as responsible beings, to fight an environmental battle, which is not limited to the safeguard of the ecosphere, but extended to global safety and security, i.e., to the preservation of the entire planet, including humanity itself. The environmental concern finally transcends all disciplines and opens up an existential portal for humanity.

Current environmental discussions are far from complete. It is in the context of today's challenge of understanding the meaning of the natural environment, its values and entitlements, and the place that humans occupy in it, that environmental philosophy finds its importance as a discipline intimately engaged with the world. However, environmental philosophy is not limited to the study of the natural environment, but extends also to environments of any kind such as built, cultural, and technological ones (see Jamieson 2008). The possibility to produce critical knowledge in relation with the environments has opened up the space for the development of the quite recent field of environmental hermeneutics. As a new stage of environmental philosophy, environmental hermeneutics offers innovative forms of thought in order to address the increasing complexities of environmental challenges and changes (see Mugerauer 1995). Through the extension of the principle of interpretation to the study of the environments, environmental hermeneutics focuses on the interpretive nature of human experience and on how environments relate to our being with and in the world (see Clingerman 2015, 207).

It is from the consideration of the inspiring reflections elaborated in the dynamic field of environmental hermeneutics that the present contribution takes its point of departure. Relying on Ricoeur's most essential hermeneutical principle that lived experience continues "to give rise to thought" (Ricoeur 1967, 347), I suggest to consider the fruitful intersection between environmental theory and Ricoeur's hermeneutics. The attention will be oriented toward the discussion of the natural environment conceived as essential surrounding and lived space in which our existence takes place together with all other species. Yet, given that the scope of Ricoeur's philosophical thought is very broad, the present contribution does not seek to offer a comprehensive account of his work in the context of environmental hermeneutics. My claim is more modest. Following Ricoeur's account of the relation between hermeneutics and phenomenology, and taking a critical step beyond it, my article aims at considering how the continuity between Ricoeur's seminal phenomenology of embodiment, his attention to the dialectic between belonging and distanciation, and his theory of mimesis elaborated in his narrative hermeneutics, can be involved in the development of an interpretive philosophy of the natural environment. I will take a look at these moments by way of suggesting new directions for what I call an "eco-hermeneutic phenomenology" – directions which might bring together the rich insights of Ricoeur's phenomenology and his philosophy of interpretation, and push them further in the current philosophical landscape as profoundly marked by the environmental debate.

This article consists of four sections. In the first part, I will begin with a broad framing of the connection between Ricoeur's thought and environ-

mental philosophy. Then, I will set forward the groundings of the relationship between human being's lived body and the natural sphere from Ricoeur's phenomenological account. In the third section, I will shift the emphasis from the phenomenological approach to nature to the hermeneutical understanding of the natural environment through the application of the dialectic of belonging and distanciation. Finally, I will show Ricoeur's conception of the threefold mimesis in relation to the natural environment through the exploration of the circular movement of being situated (pre-figuration), situating (configuration) and re-situating (refiguration) ourselves in nature. I believe that these reflections indicate important possibilities for rethinking the mutually enhancing human-natural environment interactions and the grounds of our dwelling in the natural world as essential household (*oikos*) for all the living and nonliving beings.

1. Ricoeur and the Environmental Concern. Setting the Scene

Ricoeur has never elaborated a philosophy of the environment nor left any major work dedicated to environmental issues. However, he did not ignore or deny the problem of the environmental change or the active role of human beings in interacting in the environment. His interest related to environmental questions is ultimately fragmentary and scattered across a lifetime of writing. More exactly, it is in his mature ethical thought that Ricoeur approaches issues concerning the urban and the natural environment both indirectly through the study of themes such as responsibility, narrative and memory, and directly in short interviews, which remain mostly unknown, about ecology, bioethics and the role just institutions for the preservation of life on Earth (see Ricoeur 2014). What emerges from his writings, though, is a more attentive sensibility towards the complexities of the urban environment (see Ricoeur 1994, 1998, 2000), rather than a concentrated attention to the natural sphere. The speculative reasons for explaining the fact that Ricoeur has never directed his thought towards a comprehensive analysis of the natural environment might be understood as follows (see Utsler 2009). Ricoeur died in Paris at age ninety-two on May 20th, 2005. Having its origins in the common growing awareness of the dangerous consequences of environmental devastation and arising as an applied philosophical ethics first, environmental philosophy has scarcely appeared on the philosophical scene for more than a generation (see Foltz and Frodeman 2004). It is in this new speculative context that the International Society for Environmental Ethics (ISEE) and the International Association for Environmental Philosophy (IAEP) were founded respectively in 1990 and in 1997. In the final years of his life, which coincide with the rise of environmental concerns as urgent philosophical, social, ethical, and political

issues, we can consider that Ricoeur was already focused on other central questions of his thought and probably unable to have the right time to develop a comprehensive study on the multifaceted aspects of the natural environment or on its crisis. Nevertheless, I believe that his thought can be coherently employed in the various forms of environmental discourse in general and in the growing field of environmental hermeneutics in particular. With his great intellectual sensitivity, Ricoeur's has always tried to establish a productive dialogue among opposing perspectives, embracing many different ways of thinking. From this point of view, Ricoeur's dialogical attitude and his constant task to create new mediations among conflicting positions allow us to call him the philosopher for all dialogues (Garcia 2008, 72). We have to acknowledge that some considerable efforts have very recently been done in this direction principally by Anglo-American philosophers concerned with environmental matters (see Clingerman, Treanor, Drenthen, and Utsler 2014), but also by French sociologists and philosophers such as Marc Breviglieri (2012) and Jean-Philippe Pierron (2013). Specifically, these authors consider Ricoeur's work as providing a rich field of phenomenological and hermeneutical elements with which to construct an interpretive matrix for environmental discussions. Given that environmental hermeneutics is interdisciplinary in its scope and approach, Ricoeur's dialogical attitude and his philosophy, as uniquely crossing disciplinary borders, can undoubtedly provide "a strong analytical framework and foundation to formulate environmental policy as well as inform the way in which we construe the environment, our relationship to it, and therefore, how we as individuals act with regard to the natural world" (Utsler 2009, 177).

Ricoeur's thought can be defined as a philosophical anthropology standing at the crossroads of his early phenomenology of the will and his hermeneutical reflections ultimately oriented towards a deeper self-understanding (see Michel 2006). As Bernhard Dauenhauer observes, Ricoeur's work is "a full-fledged philosophical anthropology, a full-fledged account of what it is to be a person" (Dauenhauer 1998, 109). In other words, his work moves from an early investigation of the structures of human being's will to a hermeneutical account of human existence as a whole, that is, from the descriptive analysis of human being as *homo volens* to the hermeneutics of *homo interpretans* (see Michel 2017) whose constitution is "contemporaneous with the constitution of meaning" (Ricoeur 1991a, 41). Ricoeur's philosophy develops as a hermeneutic phenomenology of the human being as an acting and suffering being living together with others in the world (see Ricoeur 1992, 23). With that in mind, let us focus on what can be conceived as the first stage of a Ricoeurian inspired eco-hermeneutical phenomenology: his phenomenological analysis of human body as the basic medium of our being in the world. More exactly, with reference to Ricoeur's *Freedom*

and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary (1966), let's draw our attention to the question of the body as representing the most original source of our relationship with the natural sphere.

2. *Phenomenology of Embodiment and the Natural Environment. Anthropo-centric vs. Eco-centric?*

Ricoeur elaborates his own phenomenological reflection on the body in *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* through the examination of the fundamental human possibilities following three guiding ideas: “the reciprocity of the voluntary and the involuntary, the necessity of going beyond psychological dualism and seeking the common standard of the involuntary and the voluntary in subjectivity, and finally the primacy of conciliation over paradox” (Ricoeur 1966, 341). More precisely, the issue of the body is analyzed in three important sections: (1) “Motivation and the Corporeal Involuntary”, (2) “Bodily Spontaneity”, and (3) “Life: Structure, Growth, Genesis, Birth”. Ricoeur’s phenomenological analysis of the body finds its originality in the attempt to confirm human being as embodied being through a descriptive methodology (see Vendra 2020). In other words, what Ricoeur wants to show in his phenomenological approach to the body is the nature of human being through the reconciliation between phenomenology and existentialism, i.e., between the transcendental dimension of meaning and the immanent dimension of existence. Taking his point of departure from Husserl’s strategic dichotomy between body (*Körper*) and flesh (*Leib*), Ricoeur’s phenomenological analysis of the body focuses on the complex interrelation between the body seen as a physical natural body among other bodies (*Körper*) and the lived body (*Leib*) as the experienced zero-point of orientation in the world. As Ricoeur puts it, “to the body-as-object is semantically opposed the lived body, one’s own body [...] There is one body that is mine, whereas all the body objects are before me” (Ricoeur 2004, 419). Human embodied condition, which forms the necessary underpinnings of our existence, has an enigmatic character. On the one hand, following Maine de Biran’s thought, according to Ricoeur one’s body refers to the realm of passivity, by operating as mediator between human being and external reality. Human body is, then, a heteronomous organism among other biophysical organisms in nature. On the other hand, though, human body is the primordial source of most original power of acting. The body is, then, an integral part of human being’s pre-reflective awareness of being a self and it is constitutive of the sense of agency, namely, it is an organ of autonomy. In this regard the body, as the opening onto a world, is the intermediate between the flesh as intimacy to the self and the world. As Ricoeur observes, “the first meaning I read in my body, insofar as the body is

a mediation of appearance, is not that it is finite, but precisely that it is open onto... It is this openness onto... which makes my body an originating mediator 'between' myself and the world" (Ricoeur 1965, 19). It is from the perspective of our bodily experience that we enter into an intentional relationship with the world in which things appear. The body gives orientation to the whole system of our experience: everything that appears belongs to our own lived-body's surroundings. Therefore, our body does not merely close us to passivity, but it directs us actively towards the world. Between our body and the world there is a relation of interdependence and simultaneity in the sense that the world is given to us as bodily investigated and the body is revealed to us in this exploration of the world. This means that through my body I perceive myself as a mundane reality, namely, I identify myself with one of the things of nature, with a physical thing (*Körper*), which is experienced at the same time as my owned body (*Leib*). Otherwise put, through my body I identify myself as complex part of the environment, both as a passive and active member of it.

It is from the experience of the lived body that human beings firstly discover themselves as inter-corporeally situated into the natural world (see Utsler 2009, 175). Hence, it is by reason of our embodiment that we experience our essential relationship with the sheltering-surrounding natural world as offering the most basic survival possibilities, but also the most original limitations. Indeed, the body requires to eat, to drink, to sleep, to exercise, etc. For achieving these fundamental necessities, human being is subject to the anonymous conditions of the natural world. The satisfaction of these needs is not possible "apart from a whole series of ecological relationships" (Utsler 2009, 175). My sense of the lived body is inextricably bound up with the natural environment. Focusing on the connection between the body and the world, Ricoeur describes the body as the medium of all needs, motives, desires, and values, which incline human beings to act. He writes: "to feed myself is to place myself on the level of reality of the objects on which I depend [...] they drag me to the level of objects and make me a part of the great *natural cycles*" (Ricoeur 1966, 87). But contrary to animals and other forms of life, the relationship with needs arising from our bodily experience implies a first form of judgment and the consequent discovering of organic values. Revealed in the lived body, organic values insert human being in the context of an interrelated and interdependent relation with nature. Moreover, as Ricoeur adds, all other values "assume a serious, dramatic significance through a comparison with the values that enter history through my body" (Ricoeur 1966, 85). Ricoeur's phenomenological analysis of the body reveals the relational character of human being's experience as occupying a middle position between self-presence and the external world. Considering the intimate relational dimension of human be-

ing's bodily existence, I think that in his analysis of organic values Ricoeur indirectly suggests that these basic values, which are sets of competing demands, must not be reduced to utility values or subjective assessments. The reduction of organic values to utility standards would imply the misrecognition of the mediated relational bond between ourselves and the world as space of encounter with the otherness. Yet, as Ricoeur notes, this otherness to which we are intimately connected is "not reduced, as is too often granted, to the otherness of another Person" (Ricoeur 1992, 317). By interpreting Ricoeur's statement in the context of an environmental perspective, we can affirm that even before our relationship with other human beings, we are originally related to the otherness of the natural environment perceived paradoxically as space of integration and context of resistance. The natural environment is, then, the most primitive source of flourishing for our life, but also the most original context of constraint. In other words, the natural environment can be defined as the ultimate alterity for the human being, as a dimension on which we depend for the actualization and flourishing of our life. If we do not recognize the primordial bond between ourselves and the natural environment, we are necessarily led to "an inner devastation by which one distances oneself from one's own animality and bodiliness, a distancing that cannot but surely inhabit and/or distort the basic source of our vital value experience – our bodies – and, with it, the perception of ecological values" (White 2007, 186). Henceforth, the experience of the organic values is "a question of coming to terms with our animality and vitality, of facing the fact that our vitality is as much a part of us as our rationality and that therefore we are not 'above' the ecosystem but are living members of it" (White 2007, 187). In short, Ricoeur's phenomenology of the body leads us to think ourselves not merely as living embodied beings, but as inter-beings in a dialectical relationship with the natural sphere and its living and nonliving components.

I think that Ricoeur's phenomenological inquiry into embodiment invites us to think the relationship between human being and natural environment neither as one of dominance nor as one of fusion. Otherwise put, I argue that Ricoeur's phenomenology of the body does not fall in the human-nature divide (see Washington 2013, 67). Specifically, by presenting the dynamic interconnections between human body and nature, in the context of the ongoing mediating relations of adaptation and belonging, Ricoeur's phenomenology leads to the rejection both of the technoscientific objectivism, which considers the natural environment as an exploitable dimension through the instrumental reason, and the exalted anthropocentrism. As Ricoeur puts it, "the first of these characteristics, which appeared at the time of Galileo and Descartes with the mathematization of physical reality, lead to removing all opacity from the real and to reducing it to a

mathematical model [...]; the second characteristic leads to making the thinking subject the center of the universe of meaning” (Ricoeur 1998, 56). He adds also that “this twofold plea finds strong echoes in many contemporary critics of modernity” (Ricoeur 1998, 56). However, in his phenomenological approach to human being, Ricoeur does not acknowledge an equal value between human beings and animals, plants, and minerals, as components of the natural world. Although he recognizes through the analysis of human will’s dimensions, the voluntary and the involuntary, human being’s interrelatedness with the large biotic environment, Ricoeur epitomizes the fact that only the human being is an intentional being, who can deliberately intervene in the course of things. Nevertheless, human freedom is not absolute, but “it is, in each of its moments, activity and receptivity. It constitutes itself by receiving what it does not produce: values, capacities, and pure nature. In this respect, our freedom is only human” (Ricoeur 1966, 484). Conceiving the singularity of human experience of the world through intentionality and freedom as governed and limited by the body, we can state that Ricoeur gives to human being a certain kind of human epistemic locatedness, without embracing anthropocentrism. Without the recognition of these phenomenological premises, any attempt to develop an environmental hermeneutics based on Ricoeur’s thought would be, in my opinion, incomplete or even groundless.

3. Belonging and Distanciation: Making Sense of the Natural Environment

We have just seen that Ricoeur’s phenomenology of embodiment presents significant suggestions to think our most basic relationship with the natural sphere. As such, we have explained that Ricoeur’s phenomenological approach to human body emphasizes the complex interdependence between human being and nature. Specifically, his phenomenological reflection has led us to conceive our relation with the natural environment as one of interrelation, beyond the anthropocentric/eco-centric binary opposition, but also contrary to any final synthesis or fusion between humanity and nature. After having analyzed these phenomenological insights, we should turn our attention now on the productive tension between human being and the natural environment moving from the phenomenological description to Ricoeur’s hermeneutical turn. More precisely, we should shift our focus from the descriptive analysis of the relationship between human being’s embodied existence and the natural sphere, to an interpretive understanding of the experience of our participatory belonging to the natural environment. Following Ricoeur’s line of thought, the phenomenological roots of his work becomes more complex and nuanced. Concerning the development of Ricoeur’s philosophy, Johann Michel argues that “the art of

Ricoeurian dialectic, but also its own difficulty, consists in the enrichment of an original phenomenological source with methods and paradigms which are initially foreign to phenomenology” (Michel 2015, 23). Ricoeur’s overall methodological approach changes from a descriptive inspired phenomenology to a hermeneutical phenomenology of symbols, moved by the fundamental conviction that descriptive phenomenology is inadequate for the full range of the philosophical task. It is my contention that the movement from descriptive phenomenology to hermeneutic phenomenology shows a methodological and epistemological tension that can inwardly affect our approach to the natural environment. The changes of method implied by Ricoeur’s evolution from a descriptive phenomenology to an explicitly hermeneutic one, allows us to move from the conception of the natural sphere as paradoxical context of possibilities and limitations linked to the body, in which the negative sense of constraint prevails, to the outline of the natural environment as a dimension connected to the productive and interpretative power of human being’s experience, in which a more positive conception of nature is at stake. In order to take these crucial issues into consideration, we have to focus on Ricoeur’s account of the conceptual pair of “belonging” (*appartenance*) and “distanciation”. Elaborated in his hermeneutics of discourse and the text largely during the 1970s (see Ricoeur 1991a), I will show that the dialectic of belonging and distanciation can be inserted in the conceptual network of environmental hermeneutics. Let’s see, then, how this play can enable us to better understand our approach to the natural environment and to enrich the debate over the place of human beings in it.

The possibility to apply the dialectic of belonging and distanciation to the philosophical approach to the natural environment lies in the process of “deregionalization” of hermeneutics. As Ricoeur observes, a real movement of deregionalization in the history of hermeneutics begins with “the attempt to extract a general problem from the activity of interpretation which is engaged in different texts” (Ricoeur 1991a, 55). Thus, deregionalization can be defined as “the ambition to expand the study of interpretation beyond a particular set of texts (historically these were legal, scriptural, and philological texts), and to discover universal, general principle of interpretation applicable to a broad range of texts and even to the nontextual” (Ritivoi 2006, 11). Ricoeur sees Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey as the first authors to launch a series of efforts dedicated to the deregionalization of hermeneutics at the end of the Eighteenth Century. It is in this framework that, “the hermeneutic problem becomes a philosophic problem” (Ricoeur 1974, 5) concerned with methodological and epistemological questions. Hermeneutics is, then, transformed into a general philosophical theory of interpretation. For the sake of our discussion, it is essentially important to highlight that Ricoeur’s hermeneutics is not understood in terms

of phenomenological “deregionalization”. Indeed, in the development of a “deregionalized” theory of interpretation, Ricoeur considers phenomenology as “the unsurpassable presupposition of hermeneutics” (Ricoeur 1991a, 38). By conceiving phenomenology as a descriptive methodology concerning the directedness of consciousness towards meaning of being, and hermeneutics as an interpretive discourse regarding human experience as meaningful or disclosing latent meanings, both phenomenology and hermeneutics establish an orientation and a direction for meaning. Ricoeurian famous graft of hermeneutics onto phenomenology opens up phenomenology to a non-idealistic conception of meaning. Otherwise put, the dialectic of belonging and distanciation is entangled on the one hand, with human activity of interpretation as mediated knowledge of the world, and on the other hand, with our existential situatedness. Interpretation is impossible without being, process, relatedness and experience. Therefore, a philosophical approach to the natural environment inspired by Ricoeur’s work cannot be limited neither to an eco-phenomenology nor to an environmental hermeneutics. By taking into consideration the work of graft of hermeneutic onto phenomenology, I claim that Ricoeur provides us with the tools for a systematic approach to the natural environment characterized as an eco-hermeneutical phenomenology.

Interpretation finds its roots in the relation between human being and the situational reference to an actual world (*Umwelt*). Specifically, in his reflection on the model of the text (see Ricoeur 1991a), Ricoeur present a sharp distinction between the actual situational world (*Umwelt*) and the symbolic world (*Welt*) of interpretation. As he argues,

far from saying that the text is then without world, I shall now say without paradox that only man *has a world* and not just a situation. In the same manner that the text frees its meaning from the tutelage of the mental intention, it frees its reference from the limits of ostensive reference. For us, the world is the ensemble of references opened up by the text (Ricoeur 1991a, 149).

According to Ricoeur, “to understand a text is at the same time to light up our own situation or, if you will, to interpolate among the predicates of our situation all the significations that make a *Welt* of our *Umwelt*” (Ricoeur 1991a, 149). This argument can be considered as a very fundamental issue in the development of an environmental phenomenological hermeneutics. In Ricoeur’s terms, the metaphor of textuality suggests the possibility of a productive distanciation, that is, the production of a revisited world. However, Ricoeur does not claim that distanciation is an alternative to belonging, that is, the critical perspective of the world is not opposed to the situational belonging to it. As he argues, distanciation is what interrupts “the relation of belonging in order to signify it” (Ricoeur 1991a, 40). Signi-

fication is followed by the interpretation of meaning, which renders near what is far. As such, distanciation and signification follow a movement directed to a renewed appropriation. Contrary to Gadamer's hermeneutics, Ricoeur thinks that productive distanciation is not at odds with participatory belonging. There is, then, a positive notion of distanciation as a moment of belonging. If belonging is what makes understanding possible, distanciation allows us to take a critical stance. As long as belonging is not opposed to distanciation, hermeneutics is not opposed to critique: the moment of understanding and that of critique are complementary (see Ricoeur 1991a, 307). The dialectic of belonging and distanciation is, then, entangled to human activity of interpretation, as the mode of mediated knowledge of the world, and to the finitude of our being-in-the-world as embodied beings. Considered in the light of the relationship between human being and the natural environment, our original experience of belonging to the natural sphere is enriched "when, following distanciation, we are replaced in nature through hermeneutical appropriation" (Utsler 2011, 145). Agreeing with Utsler, "distanciation is the dialectical counterpart of participatory belonging that represents an oscillation between remoteness and proximity that makes up a fuller understanding of environmental experience" (Utsler 2009, 176). The hermeneutical approach to the natural environment requires our distanciation from a pre-reflective belonging to the natural world. Human being belonging to the natural environment has to be understood as a belonging through distance, namely, as a dynamic belonging in a tensive connection to distance as producing and re-producing the meaningful relationship between ourselves and the natural environment seen as the most original place in which we reside.

By approaching the natural environment through the hermeneutical lens, our relationship with it becomes more complex than it appears in the phenomenological description. The complex continuity between ourselves and the natural sphere is characterized by a fluctuating framework of belonging and distanciation, of proximity and distance. Contrary to some phenomenologists presupposing that human being has an immediate and undisturbed understanding of the natural environment, in the hermeneutical perspective the meaning of nature is not given immediately (see Abram 1996). Rather, by conceiving human beings as essentially meaning-seeking beings, hermeneutics sees the encounter with nature as always mediated through the realm of interpretations. Environmental hermeneutics focuses, then, on the meaning that nature has for us, that is, within human productive understanding. I think that the shift of methodological emphasis that Ricoeur undertakes in his thought suggests us that it is possible to describe our relationship with nature through the phenomenological method, but this intuitive description requires an explanatory detour through the ex-

pressions of our understanding. In this perspective, our pre-reflexive belonging to the natural world, in which we project a pre-understanding of it as situated beings, is the *a priori* condition of all hermeneutics. Whereas we can give an initial description of our relation with the natural sphere, i.e., an immediate intuition of its traits, the understanding of nature is always mediated through a dialectic of belonging and distanciation.

The understanding of nature is always contextual and essentially polysemic. We are inextricably bound up with our environment. An example is my own Italian upbringing coupled with my experiences and education in France. Had I been born of the same parents in a completely different natural environment and social framework, although I would be the same person in terms of what Ricoeur calls *idem-identity* (sameness) (see Ricoeur 1992, 140), I would be a different selfhood (*ipse-identity*) in relation to the environment. As Ricoeur argues, “there is no world without a self who finds itself in it and acts in it; there is no self without a world that is practicable in some fashion” (Ricoeur 1992, 311). Recent studies have revealed from a psychological and sociological perspective, how human beings tend to personalize their encounter with the environments (see Clayton and Optow 2003). It is, then, clear that the understanding of the natural environment develops within the context of our historical tradition of interpretations. Thus, environmental hermeneutics has to take into account “the historical conditions that shape our understanding, bound up with our own finitude” (Utsler 2009, 177). In this sense, natural environment can be considered as “the text, and people, according to their culture, context, and identity, read and interpret it and subsequently make meaning out of it” (Kalpita and Baidur 2017, 38). David Abram observes that when we try to explain the life-world conceptually, “we seem to forget our active participation within it. Striving to represent the world, we inevitably forfeit its direct presence” (Abram 1996, 40). Hence, we should recognize that meanings cannot exist apart from the presence and the participatory belonging of human beings in the world. Our interpretation of nature is, then, linked to the way we inhabit the world in which we live. Otherwise put, as always inscribed in history, the understanding of nature cannot be separated from the urban environment, which belongs to and affects more than one generation. It is in the urban context taken as ongoing projectuality (see Ricoeur 1968, 119) that human beings become aware of the fact that nature is exposed to their interpretations, initiatives and responsibility. Since meanings are always linked to the interpretive socio-cultural context in which they arise, the result is a plurality of interpretations. However, recognizing the plurality of interpretations does not mean to embrace relativism. As Ricoeur observes, the main task of hermeneutics is to clarify and mediate the conflict of interpretations in the world through a dialectic involving listening and suspi-

cion, understanding and explanation, tradition and critique, belonging and distanciation (see Ricoeur 1974). As such, agreeing with John Van Buren, we can consider Ricoeur's hermeneutics as "well suited for dealing with heated environmental conflicts, such as local, national, and international conflicts" (Van Buren 2014, 17). Applied to the philosophical study of the natural environment, Ricoeur's hermeneutics can orientate the interpretive analysis of the meaning of the natural sphere seen as something that can be read and critically interpreted. Ricoeur's work accompanies, then, environmental hermeneutics as the interpretive critical study of nature as a text, that is, of the biophysical environment, its meanings and meaningful references.

4. *The Mimetic Construction of an Interpretative Situatedness in Nature*

We have just discussed how the dialectic of belonging and distanciation can find a methodological application in the field of environmental philosophy as opening up fresh insight into the relationship between human beings and the natural environment. Following Ricoeur's lead, we have argued that the hermeneutic concepts of belonging and distance are meaningful upon the basis of our existential situatedness in the world, that is, of our embodied experience as always and already practically or concernedly involved with the things in the world. Therefore, we have observed that an environmental philosophy coherently inspired by Ricoeur's thought has to take into consideration the phenomenological description of the body, i.e., of our corporeal condition of being in the world, and the shift in hermeneutics in which the dialectic between the experience of belonging and critical distance is the key feature. In doing so, Ricoeur's call for the graft of hermeneutics onto phenomenology can be deployed in the direction of an eco-hermeneutical phenomenology. These reflections can be further extended if we take into consideration another crucial moment of Ricoeur's hermeneutical thought: the phenomenological-hermeneutic explication of the concept of mimesis. Elaborated by Ricoeur in his trilogy *Time and Narrative*, I claim that the threefold dialectic of mimesis₁, mimesis₂ and mimesis₃ (Ricoeur 1984, 1985, 1988), can be inserted in the environmental discussion as enabling for a philosophical discussion of the relationship between human being and the natural environment. We should, then, consider in which way the theory of mimesis can shed light on thinking human being as part of the natural environment and as capable to objectify nature through contact and interference. More precisely, the threefold mimesis leads us to reflect on our relationship with the natural environment through the hermeneutical arc of being-situated (mimesis₁), situating (mimesis₂) and re-situating (mimesis₃) ourselves in the natural environment.

Based on Aristotle's notion of mimesis in his *Poetics*, Ricoeur's analysis of the mimetic process explains mimesis₁ as the prefigurative level of everyday understanding of action and interaction. I suggest that mimesis₁ or prefiguration can be referred to human being's pre-reflective experience of the natural sphere as lived space. As we have already explained, it is through the experience of the lived body that human being is originally situated in nature and meets the natural environment as context of possibilities and constraints. More exactly, the natural sphere emerges as a space affectively known by human being's intentionality and the feeling body. Our bodily existence is the most basic source of different axes of interest and value experienced in the lived space. However, nature as lived space is not a subjective dimension. Rather, we can affirm that "the lived space, although clearly different from the geometrical space is not altogether separated from all references to a concrete space" (Umbelino 2015, 202). Thus, Ricoeur observes that the lived space cannot be "experienced without any reference, even if just an allusion to the points, lines, surfaces, distances, volumes, inscribed in a space without connections with the here and now inherent to the own body" (Ricoeur 2004, 185). In doing so, we can argue that as embodied beings we are not just situated in nature or we do not just belong in nature as lived space. Specifically, we are actively involved in a relationship of interdependence with nature's otherness. As such, nature as lived space is not a raw environment, but it is what gives the most essential possibility for human being to live.

The pre-understanding of our relationship with the natural sphere as lived space has to be processed through a second stage, i.e., what Ricoeur calls mimesis₂ or configuration. We should move, then, from our being-situated in nature as lived space of interrelatedness to reflexively situate ourselves in nature as a place to inhabit. As Ricoeur puts it, "corporeal space is immediately linked with the surrounding space of the environment, some fragment of inhabitable land" (Ricoeur 2004, 148). The understanding of the natural environment as inhabitable place leads us to think that "the root-word is quite literally humble (*humilis*), from the Latin *humus*, earth or ground; hence home earth-being and *humanus* earthly, human" (Schweiker 2010, 132). Our humbleness arises from the recognition that, as finite beings, we can never assimilate nature as lived space in knowledge or fully master it through any means available to us. In this sense, although the lived space of nature cannot be considered as "one-with-humankind" (Magrini 2019, 168), it offers us the possibility to find and to establish our life within its surrounds. Otherwise put, we have the power to adapt nature to our distinct needs, namely, we inhabit nature as place infused with meanings. But this productive power does not mean that we have an absolute control on nature. Mimesis₂ allows, then, the passage from the analysis of a

pre-reflexive relationship between human being and the natural sphere as lived space, to the configuration of the bond between ourselves and the natural environment as inhabited place. Deployed in the context of environmental philosophy, configuration can be conceived, then, as the moment of mediation between our embodied experience of nature as lives space and our interpretive approach of nature as place in which we dwell.

According to Ricoeur narrative configuration is “not completed in the text but in the reader and, under this condition, makes possible the reconfiguration of life by narrative” (Ricoeur 1991b, 26). In other words, the operation of mimesis is completed only when the reader receives and reads the text. Mimesis₃ consists, then, in the act of reading that “marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader” (Ricoeur 1984, 71). Reading completes the hermeneutic passage “from a prefigured world to a transfigured world through the mediation of a configured world” (Ricoeur 1991c, 151). Ricoeur recognizes that something similar can be said about architecture’s narrative of space (Ricoeur 1998, 44) “as it also opens itself to a kind of ‘refiguration’, to the reading of those who inhabit each architectural project” (Umbelino 2015, 119). I think that the moment of reconfiguration is significant also with reference to the natural environment and not only to the built one. Interpreted in the context of human being’s interaction with nature, mimesis₃ corresponds to the difficult act of replacing ourselves in the natural world. More precisely, as Stephanie Mills puts it, resituating ourselves in the natural environment means “going back to nature when nature’s all but gone” (Mills 2008, 1). This is an important thesis: the interpretation of ourselves is possible not only through the attentive interpretation of built spaces and texts, but also through the interpretation of our relationship with the natural environment. Reconfiguring our bond with nature leads us to the rediscovery of our symbiotic balance with the natural environment, “a balance that fosters flourishing in human beings and the other members of the natural world in which we dwell” (Utsler 2011, 139). The act of reconfiguration allows us not merely to rethink our original relationship with nature and the balanced relationship with it, but it enables also to provide a chance to restore nature in the process. In this framework the natural environment arises as an ongoing collective challenge and as a shared responsibility. Resituating ourselves in the natural environment is what opens up the possibility of producing and reproducing our relationship with nature to the end of saving it from devastation.

5. Conclusion: “Waiting for Re-birth”

In this article I have investigated the opportunity of a fruitful development of Ricoeur’s thought in the direction of environmental hermeneutics.

In doing so, I have proposed a critical reading of Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology and shown how it can contribute to the formulation of an environmental hermeneutics attentive to the relationship between human being's life and the natural environment. We can note the following points by way of conclusion.

My interest was primarily focused on Ricoeur's phenomenology of embodiment as descriptive analysis of human being's relationship with nature as context of possibilities and limitations. I have drawn attention to human embodied situation as endowing us with a "double allegiance" (Ricoeur 1992, 111): on the one hand, human beings as embodied beings are bound to the laws of the natural world, and on the other hand, they can break away from those laws through their limited freedom. Human existence in nature is, then, structured through a series of dialectically related dualities, such as passivity and activity, subjectivity and objectivity, identity and diversity, particularity and multiplicity. Ricoeur's phenomenological analysis helps the environmental discourse to overcome the anthropocentric/ecocentric divide through the description of the interrelation between human being's lived body and the natural sphere.

The analysis of the relationship between human being as embodied being and the natural space has been further developed through the hermeneutics of human being as *homo interpretans* of the natural environment. Thought the consideration of the dialectic between belonging and distancing, we have explained the possibility to deal with different interpretations of the environment. In this context, the interpretation of the natural environment arises as a multidimensional experience, which includes belonging and critical distance, involvement and disinvolvement.

Our life arises, then, in the middle of an already existing natural environment. We are born in a world of meaning, i.e., in a symbolic structured world, that precedes and gives us tools of reference for understanding ourselves and others: "the lifeworld of prefiguration consists in an already lived and experienced environment, characterized by a distinct style of dwelling and building" (Furia 2019, 90). In contrast with the modern conception of human subject as a being existing distant and disengaged from everything outside its own mind, at the core of Ricoeur's thought there is not a clear and distinct being, i.e., a subjectivity idealistically transparent to itself, but rather a self whose constitution and understanding are a lifelong task, that is, a human subject conceived as a mysterious personal reality that can never be fully grasped. Contrary to all philosophy of immediacy, Ricoeur develops a reflexive philosophy, i.e., an ongoing critical and interpretive reflection. Following this path, I proposed to explore the circular hermeneutic movement between being-situated, situating and resituating ourselves in the natural environment.

The correlation between Ricoeur's thought and environmental thinking points toward an eco-hermeneutical phenomenology, that is, a reflection attentive to the place of human being as embodied being or *homo volens* in the natural space, accompanied by a hermeneutics of human beings as *homo interpretans* of the natural environment through the dialectic of belonging and distanciation, and leading to a critical perspective of human being as *homo ecologicus*, i.e., as a responsible being custodial and nurturing of nature. Ricoeur invites us to "wait for re-birth" (*atteindre le renais-sance*) calling for a renewed relationship with the natural environment (Ricoeur 2014, 18). But the waiting is not something to be lived passively. Rather, it demands the activity of our interpretive thought and responsible actions. Our existence in the natural environment is, then, an ongoing project in need of constant renewal for the promotion of the survival and the flourishing of all human and non-human nature on this Earth.

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