

HERMENEUTIC ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY: IDENTITY,
ACTION, AND THE IMAGINATION

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One of the major themes in environmental philosophy in the twenty-first century has broadly focused on how we experience and value the natural world. Along those lines, the driving question I take up in this project is if our ordinary experiences are seen as interpretations, what is the significance of this for our moral claims about the environment? Drawing on the hermeneutic philosophies of Hans Georg-Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, I examine environmental interpretation as it relates particularly to identity, meaningful action, and the mediating function of the imagination. These three interconnected aspects show both our capability for new understandings related to the natural world, as well as problem of conflicting, yet equally valid, views on environmental value.

To explore this tension further I consider the relevance of hermeneutic conceptions of truth and translation for environmental ethics. A hermeneutic notion of truth highlights the difficulties in making strong normative claims about the environment, while a hermeneutic view of translation is helpful in thinking about the otherness of nature and what this means for ecological values. In this project I am particularly interested in the conflict of environmental interpretation and the implications that a hermeneutic frame has for the limits of environmental understanding and value. I argue that hermeneutics and narrative theory shows that we can argue for direct moral consideration of ecological others or the natural world only as merely possible interpretations among others.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of the major themes in environmental philosophy in the twenty-first century has broadly focused on how we experience and value the natural world. Attention has largely turned from firm environmental ethics to addressing how we understand the environment and approach related values. The driving question I take up here is if our ordinary experiences are seen as interpretations, how does that affect the ways we value the natural world? I am particularly interested in the limits that are shown by this approach, the *aporia* of trying to derive environmental values from a philosophy based on the plurality of interpretation.

I am working from the tradition of environmental hermeneutics, which examines human understanding of the natural world through the framework provided by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. Hermeneutics is not a method, but a philosophical approach based on the starting point that human experience is fundamentally interpretative. Our experience is mediated by language, and as such is generally bound up with interpretation, similar to how we usually think of interpreting a text. Both Gadamer and Ricoeur model our experience on the *acts* of writing and reading texts. My use of hermeneutics focuses mostly on Ricoeur's work, including his later narrative theory, though I draw on key insights from Gadamer as well. I further draw on relevant work by Jean Grondin and Richard Kearney, two of the primary scholars of Gadamer and Ricoeur, respectively.

Furthermore, I am deliberately referring to my work as an environmental *philosophy* and not an environmental *ethic*. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, environmental ethics most properly refers to the consideration of the moral obligations that people do or do not have to nonhuman others; whereas an environmental philosophy, more broadly, is a systematic

approach to considering the human-nature relationship. While this may include ethical values as well, an environmental philosophy generally considers things other than or broader than ethics, such as politics, ontology, or aesthetics as they relate to the natural world. My approach, likewise, is not merely focused on our moral obligations to the environment, but primarily on environmental understanding: how we always experience it as meaningful.

My work here fits within the subfield of environmental hermeneutics. There is, however, no firm definition of what comprises this subfield.¹ One approach within environmental hermeneutics takes as its starting point that our relationship to nonhuman others and the natural world is primarily interpretation and analyzes what this means for our understanding and valuing of nonhuman others and the natural world. While my own work is similar, I focus more on what a genuinely hermeneutic approach says about human understanding and moral consideration of the environment. That is to say, that my work is meant to be an environmental philosophy that is *informed by* hermeneutics. I do not focus on the implications for hermeneutics philosophy itself, nor do I give my own interpretation of the natural world. Instead, by examining the plurality of meanings and conflicting interpretations about the natural world, I hope to explore limits on what can be said about environmental value.

This dissertation examines three related aspects of environmental hermeneutics: identity, action, and the imagination. My project begins with Chapter 2: “Self-Understanding, Identity, and the Environment.” For Gadamer and Ricoeur both there is an inescapable link between understanding oneself and understanding anything else, so to discuss environmental

¹ David Utsler et al. give several potential definitions of environmental hermeneutics; the one that is closest to my own approach is “environmental hermeneutics *is a philosophical stance which understands how the inevitability of what Gadamer called our “hermeneutical consciousness” informs our relationship with environments.*” Utsler et al., “Introduction: Environmental Hermeneutics,” in *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics*, ed. Forrest Clingerman et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pg. 4, original emphasis.

interpretation we need to begin with identity. The main concept here is environmental self-understanding, considering how one's interpretation and valuing of the natural world relates to the already-held meanings one has about oneself in relation to the natural world. The primary focus of this section is, first, addressing the variety of experiences through which one re-interprets and values oneself and the natural world, and second, the implication that such re-interpretations can lead to both more positive and more negative environmental values.

The next section of this chapter uses Ricoeur's narrative theory and his concept of threefold mimesis to consider similar questions but with a little more depth. In particular, this section utilizes narrative theory to show how complex environmental identity is. It is based on everything from the places one has lived or visited, major experiences and events in one's life, the others who are significant to oneself, and the larger communal or societal environmental narratives of which one is a part. This chapter argues that environmental identities and values are always changing, as one's views of nature and oneself are continually re-interpreted based on new events, experiences, and encounters with others. A narrative approach also shows how conflicting environmental interpretations are difficult precisely because they relate to critical aspects of one's self, even if we are unaware of them. I follow this issue in the last section with the notions of capability and conflict. If interpretation is always ongoing, then we always have the capability for new self-understandings and new understandings of the environment. At the same time, hermeneutic and narrative theories also highlight that conflicting interpretations of the natural world may be equally valid with no clear way to resolve them.

The framing of environmental values through hermeneutic and narrative theories continues with Chapter 3: "Interpretation and Narrative in Environmental Action." For hermeneutics, actions are not just physical events, but meaningful occurrences that are open to

interpretation. Environmental actions are an interesting case of this as they clearly have two aspects: the physical ecological impact and the meaning of the action. Since actions are meaningful, they are also interpretations that relate back further to self-understanding. This is particularly relevant as agents can re-interpret their own past ecological actions and revise future anticipated actions based on changes in their environmental self-understanding and interpretations of nature. We also interpret the actions of others, so disagreements over right environmental actions are likewise conflicting interpretations related to self-understanding.

The framing of action through narrative initially parallels the examination of environmental identity, though there are several features of Ricoeur's version of narrative theory that are particularly relevant to action. The meaning of environmental action is largely related to constitutive rules, which are defined not by individuals but through communities and societies, thus relating environmental action clearly to things like regional and cultural views. Further, environment action relates to one's interpretation of and goals for a well-lived life, as well as to self-esteem, the interpretation of oneself as capable of making good judgments. On the one hand, these concepts show promise for environmental consideration through concepts of moral responsibility and the good life. On the other hand, these concepts highlight the further depth of the conflict of environmental interpretations—disagreements about ecological actions are difficult because they relate to the deepest aspects of my interpretation of myself and what kind of lives we should lead. The last section elaborates further on our capabilities for new practices and conflicts in our judgments of actions. Further, here we begin to see how environmental capability leads to conflicting interpretations.

My examination of the three aspects of environmental interpretation wraps up with Chapter 4: "Hermeneutic Environmental Imagination." The imagination, as the productive power

for new meaning, is what allows us to understand the natural world or nonhuman entities in ways other than we did before; this in turn means that the imagination is necessary for us to have changes in environmental understanding. This also shows how changes in meaning can be more important than rational arguments for environmental values. This imagination likewise relates to environmental identity and action; it is this capability for new meanings that allows me to see new ways to live and envision new ways to act, both in relation to the natural world. It is only because of the imagination we can have changes in environmental values.

By examining the imagination through narrative, we can see how environmental fiction and history changes our views of our self and our actions through the imagination. In addition, the ethical thought experiments that we commit through the narrative imagination can be extended to a sense of ecological moral agency. I further consider the imagination as it relates to shared environmental values through Ricoeur's concepts of ideology and utopia. These concepts show various ways in which the "social imaginary" relates to shared environmental meanings, which may include increasing concern for the natural world. The last part of this chapter considers how the imagination gives us capabilities for new understandings of our environmental identities and actions, which in turn can lead to new conflicts in our interpretations. This furthers the idea, seen under action, of the relationship between capabilities and environmental conflicts.

My project takes a normative turn with Chapter 5: "Truth, Translation, and Environmental Value." From a hermeneutic perspective truth is neither objective nor relative but comes about when we are open to new meanings and when we apply these meanings to our own context and situations. With this in mind, I consider related arguments from other thinkers in environmental hermeneutics; these arguments, while being fair to a hermeneutic conception of truth, still lean towards the idea that openness to new meaning leads to greater environmental

concern. In contrast, I consider how various positive and negative interpretations regarding the environment may be equally valid. We cannot say that environment concern is necessarily a better interpretation. I follow this by looking at expanded human-interest as a potential approach to considering environmental value. Such an approach encourages openness to dialogue about environmental value as well as openness to new interpretations of the natural world. That said, expanded human-interest is still caught up in conflicting interpretations of the environment.

I follow this by considering environment understanding and value through a hermeneutic notion of translation. We properly understand foreign languages by putting them into familiar terms, but also by aiming for an equivalence of meaning that admits of a limited translation while respecting the otherness of that which is foreign. Likewise, we always understand environmental others by putting them into terms meaningful to us, but at the same time we should respect that ecological others, or particularly their *otherness*, cannot be fully put into human language. This means we have a limited understanding of nonhuman others, which likewise places limits on how we can appropriately speak of their value. The best response, I argue, is again to look at different ways of human understanding of the natural world, and in relation valuing ecological others, through expanded human interest. This chapter concludes, paralleling the earlier reflection on capability and conflict, by briefly considering possibilities and limits in regard to environmental value as a setup for the conclusion.

In the conclusion of this work I address several implications that follow from my analysis. I begin by looking at two more positive aspects of a hermeneutic environmental philosophy. First, we can consider the necessity of practical environmentalism as a minimal acceptable level of ecological consideration. A hermeneutic approach shows that conflicting interpretations of the environment are equally valid, allowing for varying levels of consideration

for the natural world. The understanding that humans rely on and yet damage the natural world is irrefutable, allowing for preservation of the biosphere for human well-being as a necessary level of environmental concern. For a second point, I briefly consider the relationship of capability, moral agency, and mutual recognition. Given the increasing prevalence of positive environmental interpretations, a soft argument can be made that the search for recognition may highlight one's capabilities to do better ecologically. Despite the detour through these possibilities, my primary concern in this work is the conflicts and limits of environmental interpretation.

I then look at three points that together make up the key theme of my work, the conflict of environmental interpretation. First, a hermeneutic framing helps to show why disagreements over environmental value can be so personal and difficult to resolve.

Secondly, hermeneutics shows our environmental understanding is limited both by the finitude of human understanding overall and by our own finite historical, cultural, and ecological horizons. Third, and most importantly, is the point that from a genuinely hermeneutic perspective we cannot say that environmental care or concern is a better interpretation than views that see the natural world only as a resource. This places distinct limits on environmental philosophy, which can argue for direct moral consideration of ecological others or the natural world only as a merely possible interpretation among others.

CHAPTER 2

SELF-UNDERSTANDING, IDENTITY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

In order to set out my own theory of a hermeneutic environmental philosophy it is necessary to begin with self-understanding and identity, which are crucial for understanding interpretation. First, I consider environmental values through the hermeneutic philosophies of Gadamer and Ricoeur, focusing on the relationship between interpretation and self-understanding. The implication for environmental thought is that self-understanding is an essential part of our environmental views and values. Through focusing on environmental self-understanding, I show how various experiences, including things like literature or media, can change a person's ecological views and values. Further, I argue that the relationship between environmental understanding and self-understanding shows why disagreements over ecological value are difficult to resolve, since such disagreements relate to deeply held views of oneself.

Following the hermeneutic consideration of self-understanding, I look at a fuller concept of environmental identity, based on the later narrative work of Ricoeur. Thinking about how narrative configuration is at work in environment identity highlights how such identities, and by extension ecological values, are based on a myriad of different elements. I use Ricoeur's narrative theory to show how environmental identities and interpretations are always changing, and further how these relate to diverse elements like places, experiences, and others. I also use narrative environmental identity to revisit disagreements over ecological values, showing how conflicting views are difficult to reconcile because of how deeply they relate to identity. I end the chapter by briefly raising the related notions of environmental capability and conflict, highlighting the capability for new environmental understanding as well as the conflict of environmental interpretations.

Hermeneutic (Self-)Understanding and Nature

To properly ground a full discussion of environmental (self-)understanding, I want to begin with a hermeneutic conception of environmental identity. I am here defining environmental identity as *an individual's understanding of herself as it is related dialogically with her understanding of the human-nature relationship, of nonhuman others, and of the natural environment as a whole.*² This is to say that, first of all, a person has an interpretation or understanding of herself; or rather, self-understanding. This self is understood through many relations, including history and traditions, family and group affiliations, as well as natural environments and nonhuman others, among other things. Other thinkers have examined more specifically how social dimensions relate to one's personal identity.³ I intend to examine how self-understanding relates to the natural world and in turn how this connects with environmental understanding and values. *The circular relationship between understanding oneself and understanding the natural world is what I mean primarily by environmental identity.*

To begin, I want to focus in specifically on self-understanding, which is a primary feature of hermeneutics and a crucial part of the larger concept of identity. A person's various identities, and her overall identity, are ultimately interpretations of one's self, or collectively self-understanding. Self-understanding, in turn, is necessarily a part of my understanding of the world. The importance of this can be seen in Gadamer's claim that: "*all such understanding* [of a

² This is a variation of a previous definition I have given of environmental identity: "an individual's understanding of her self related dialogically with her understanding of environmental aspects of human and nonhuman others, as well as the natural environment as a whole." Nathan M. Bell, "Environmental Hermeneutics with and for Others: Ricoeur's Ethics and the Ecological Self," in *Interpreting Nature*, 142.

³ Examples can be seen in David M. Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 94-99; and Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Post-modern* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 247-250.

text] *is ultimately self-understanding.*"⁴ Self-understanding relates to prejudice (pre-judgment); the way I think of and understand my self is bound up with the values and meanings I project onto the world. I am always projecting a pre-understanding onto things that I interpret; in turn, interpretations are always changing my pre-judged values and self-understanding, leading to a continuing circle of interpretation and understanding.⁵ This is significant because it means that as far my understanding of myself changes so does my understanding of other things. The importance of this can be seen in Ricoeur as well, who argues that "a sort of circularity is produced between understanding the text and self-understanding."⁶ This is to say that self-understanding and understanding of things are always in a constant circular relationship, and so changes in identity and new understandings are likewise in a constant circle. Every change in how I understand myself likewise constitutes a change in what I project onto the world and in turn the way I understand the world around me. My understanding of the world cannot escape my understanding of myself; the two are always related, and both have the possibility for development and change.

Self-understanding, and in turn my understanding of anything else, is embedded in history. Gadamer refers to this as historically effected consciousness; I exist as part of a historical situation and tradition, and so my historical horizon is a source of my own prejudices and of my understanding of things. A horizon, for hermeneutics, is the limit of what I can understand from my particular historical-cultural situation, which can always shift through new

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2006), 251, original emphasis.

⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 271-278; Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 142-144, 177-178.

⁶ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 178.

understandings.⁷ To be clear, my understanding of myself, my actions, and the world around me are not impacted by history but *constituted* by it.⁸ History is an essential part of my self-understanding, and likewise my pre-understandings and interpretations are embedded in my historical existence. Historically effected consciousness is both limiting and productive. Understanding is always somewhat limited by the historical distance between myself and the issue I am interpreting, which exists in its own horizon. On the other hand, this historical distance is also productive; because of this historical gap I can encounter the text with new questions and reflect on it in new ways. I am able to understand things in new ways because of the historical distance between myself and the issue I am interpreting.⁹ Similarly for Ricoeur, there is a critical distance between myself and the text, which allows me to ask critical questions about how things could be.¹⁰ For both Gadamer and Ricoeur genuine understanding occurs when I bridge this gap by make the meaning of the text relevant to my own situation. For Gadamer understanding occurs in application; when I apply the meaning of the text to my own situation there is a fusion of horizons between myself and the text.¹¹ For Ricoeur also in understanding I appropriate the meaning of the text for myself and enlarge my own horizon of understanding.¹² In each case interpretation relates back to self-understanding; I understand the text when I understand myself and my world, in my own historical and cultural situation, differently because

⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300-303.

⁸ Jean Grondin notes that Gadamer, after *Truth and Method*, clarified that “historically effected consciousness is more being than consciousness.” *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994), 114.

⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300-301; Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 114-115; John D. Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (London: Pelican Books, 2018), 104-105.

¹⁰ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 142.

¹¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306-310; Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 115-117.

¹² Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 142-143, 177-178.

of it. Interpretation and understanding always relate back to self-understanding. With this preparation in place I want to consider what this means for environmental understanding.

Environmental (Self-)Understanding

The hermeneutic relation between interpretation and self-understanding has several important implications for human views and valuations of the natural environment. The most immediate relevance of this connection for environmental concern is that a person's self-understanding and his or her interpretation of the natural environment are inseparably related.¹³ Whether a person understands the natural world as being beautiful, dangerous, or both; as an economic resource, a resource for spiritual growth and recreation, or something with near-sacred value; and something deserving of ethical concern or not; these considerations all relate circularly with the environmental aspects of self-understanding. My self-understanding constitutes the meanings and values that I project onto the environment as a whole, which influences my interpretation of parts of the environment. My understanding of ecological others and nature, in turn, likewise affects my overall meanings and values, and thus affect my own environmental self-understanding. Whether we are referring to nonhuman animals, landscapes, or the natural world as a whole, my understanding of the environment and my understanding of myself are in an active circular relationship.

It is important to note that my self-understanding and understanding of the natural world further include environmental values. Bound up with environmental self-understanding are my pre-judgments about whether and kind of value the natural world has, including ethical values. I have already-held ideas about the purpose and value of the natural world and nonhuman others,

¹³ I am using 'natural environment' here in the general sense, referring broadly to the natural world, and to natural objects and nonhuman others overall.

and likewise notions and ideas about what is better or worse for the natural world. These pre-judgments come from my historical situation, from my culture and community, and from my past experiences, among other things. This affects my interpretation of the environment and its value, including my understanding of how things are and how things should be regarding the natural world. My interpretation of value includes ideas about ecological health, ideal levels of development versus environmental preservation, and so forth. These ideas may be different from how I believe things are, and the contrast between how I think things are and should be is precisely where I see the need for environmental action.¹⁴

My environmental values and ethical judgments about the natural world, then, are no less the result of self-understanding. Such values are as based on my historical tradition, which is the source of my projections onto and my understanding of the natural world. My environmental self-understanding is the basis not only for my underlying notions and descriptive claims about the environment, but also the basis for my implicit views of how the natural world should be and my more deliberate normative claims about nature. My environmental values relate to my identity. And so, from the viewpoint of hermeneutics, to speak of the natural world in terms of ethics involves consideration of my environmental self-understanding.

This brings us to the question of environmental understanding, or rather the way we view and think about the natural environment. First, it is important to remember that we are following a hermeneutic conception of understanding; we are not speaking here primarily of objective universal facts, but more so of an interpretation or comprehension of the environment. Two questions stand out about this line of thinking. First, what exactly is understanding and how do we mediate between competing views? Second, what is it that shapes one's understanding of the

¹⁴ Environmental action is the focus of the third chapter of the work.

environment and, relationally, one's environmental self-understanding? The short answer to both questions is essentially interpretation, through experience that is imbued with meaning and constructed through language. The best model for explaining interpretation, according to Ricoeur, is the model of the text.

The model of the text gives us several key elements for further grasping the hermeneutic ideas of interpretation and understanding. The first element is the dialectic between explanation and understanding. Explanation and understanding have traditionally been treated as two separate things, third-person external explanatory models and first- or second-person experiential or intersubjective truths. Under Ricoeur's hermeneutic framework, these are dialectically related parts of a process rather than separate epistemic paths. Our initial understanding of a text may be naïve or shallow understanding; explanatory models, such as analysis of the structure of the text, helps us to move to a deeper or informed understanding, to a comprehension. Explanations do not stand alone but are completed in informed understanding. Explanation and understanding, then, are necessary parts in the arc of interpretation.¹⁵

With a written text, for example, we may initially have a few different potential understandings of the meaning of the text. What we are trying to understand, in this case, is the meaning of the text itself, not the author. Literary analysis, as a form of explanation, helps us to differentiate the possible meanings of the text that are unlikely or improbable from those that are acceptable and potentially valid. Explanation does not lead to one objective truth, which is why we speak of *potentially valid* understanding rather than right or true understanding. Following up on this, it is important that not all interpretations or understandings of a text will be valid, but

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 71-88; *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 126-130.

there may be multiple potentially valid interpretations.¹⁶ To quote Ricoeur, “if it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal.”¹⁷ The function of explanation is to help us differentiate these, to move away from the weaker understandings and towards the better ones. Even after this, however, we may still have multiple understandings that are equally probable and yet in conflict with each other.

Likewise, when we think of different environmental understandings, we need a form of explanation to mediate between potentially competing interpretations, to take us from a naïve understanding to a more grounded or validated one. For a literary example, we might consider Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*. The novel is, in short, about a future world with rampant environmental degradation, man-made hybrid animals, and very few human people left.¹⁸ At first glance, we might consider a variety of meanings of the text; the detriments of hyper-consumerism, dangers of genetic manipulation, risks of individuals having unchecked access to technology, and warnings about environmental degradation. A careful examination of the text and its overall themes shows that the importance of environmental protection and the danger of genetic manipulation of the environment are important aspects of the story, a crucial part of the world contained in that work. We can explain the story in ways that make some understandings of the text stand out more than others. In this particular case, the environmentally relevant themes and warnings stand out as important aspects of the text; this does not make other readings or themes necessarily invalid but does support the environmental message in Atwood’s book.

To see the full relevance of this for environmental hermeneutics, it is important to move beyond the literary work. Ricoeur often points to literary analysis as a form of explanation, in

¹⁶ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 75-79; *From Text to Action*, 129-131.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, pg. 79.

¹⁸ Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake: A Novel* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004).

keeping with the written work as the primary model; however, explanation can take different forms depending on the context and on what is being interpreted or understood; the point of the model of the text is, after all, that is a model for interpretation and understanding more generally.¹⁹ Explanation therefore does not have to be literary theory, but whatever could justifiably differentiate between different understandings.

To take a very basic example, we might consider climates with deciduous trees. If, hypothetically, I were completely unfamiliar with the seasonal loss of leaves, I might go to a continental climate region in the winter and mistakenly believe that the many bare trees were dying, perhaps that the region was suffering from some sort of environmental catastrophe. A competing understanding might be that the loss of leaves was a normal natural phenomenon. In this case, explanation bears out one understanding as valid and the other as not. Scientifically, we could explain the process of abscission, which supports the view that the bare trees are part of a seasonal process. However, and this is an important part of the example, it would not necessarily have to be in scientific terms; if it were simply explained to me that the loss of leaves is something that happens every fall, and every spring the same trees sprout fresh healthy leaves, then I would understand this as a normal thing. This is, admittedly, both a very hypothetical and very basic example; the seasonal loss of leaves is common knowledge, and very few situations are as clear cut as this one. It does, nonetheless, show how we might apply explanation and understanding to the natural world outside of literature.

The other key element to a hermeneutic view of understanding is the idea of the world of the work. To get to this world we must first go through the dialectic of the part and the whole. The text is constructed by the reader, insofar as reading a text is an asymmetrical dialogue: in

¹⁹ For example, Ricoeur himself extends explanation and understanding to action, *From Text to Action*, 132-138.

reading the text, the reader speaks for the text, but in interpreting also speaks for herself. Further, text cannot be properly understood merely as the words or sentences that make up the parts, but also as the totality of the work—and the parts and whole exist relationally. To quote Ricoeur: “The presupposition of a certain whole precedes the discernment of a determinate arrangement of parts; and it is by constructing the details that we build up the whole.”²⁰ This is the hermeneutic circle, in which we project an anticipated meaning of the whole, which shapes how we interpret the parts, which in turn changes how we re-project the whole. This is why, as noted above, a person’s general understanding of the natural world and his or her understanding of particular natural objects and others are always likewise related. A person projects a general view of the environmental onto a particular encounter or other, which affects – but does not force – how she interprets that encounter or other. This interpretation of the particular then affects how she understands or interprets the natural world as a whole, which will again be projected onto particular encounters. This circular relation, again, is not just between part and whole but also between my own self-understanding and my interpretation of environmental others or experiences. This overall projection of the whole relates, as noted above, to the fore-structure of understanding for Gadamer or to pre-understanding Ricoeur.²¹ This projection is not necessarily good or bad but it is always there, rooted in self-understanding.

With the dialectic of part and whole in mind we can turn to concept of the world of the work: a world made up of the references of the text, which one encounters in interpretation. There is not just the world of the text but, if we are open to it, a possible mode of being-in-the-world. Therefore, in being truly open to the world of the text, we see a way in which we could

²⁰ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 176-181. Gadamer similarly states that “the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole,” *Truth and Method*, 291.

²¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 268-273; Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 176-181.

be, not just in that world but in our own world also. This is always relational: understanding the world and understanding the self differently are a part of the same interpretive process—it is a new self-understanding that allows a reinterpretation of both the world of the work and the world in which we live, and it is this reinterpretation that leads to a revised self-understanding.²²

The world of the work brings us back to the importance of mediated experiences, such as texts, for environmental philosophy. The text of a nature writer, for example, makes distinct references to nature in a way that creates a world in which nature is fore-grounded and can have meaning and value. The reader of the text, following the references, encounters this world. The reader is not attempting to get into the author's mind, but yet the text, while standing on its own, is not *entirely* removed from the environmental values of the author, which are reflected in the references that make up the world of the work. As Ricoeur argues: "If the intentional fallacy overlooks the semantic autonomy of the text, the opposite fallacy forgets that a text remains a discourse told by somebody . . . It is impossible to cancel out this main characteristic of discourse without reducing texts to natural objects . . ." ²³ This is to say that just as it is fallacious to try to read the mind or intentions of the author, it is likewise invalid to treat the text as something entirely outside of an intention filled with meanings or values. In other words, while we are not attempting to read the author through the text, the text may well be reflective of environmental values all the same. Either way, the text creates a world in which the natural environment exists in a certain way. If the reader does not already view nature in a similar way, the world of the text appears unfamiliar, being far from a reality both spatially and emotionally distant from the environment. The reader makes this unfamiliar world his or her own—applies or

²² Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 177-178.

²³ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 30.

appropriates it—by opening up, letting it speak, and finding the significance of the text’s meaning for her understanding of herself and her lived world. Application, or appropriation, is the key to understanding the text.²⁴ The reader now sees her world and herself in new ways through the world of the work.

An actual example is fruitful here. One such world opened up by the text of nature writing might be found in Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, in which Dillard describes a physical environment where:

Upstream is a wall of light split into planks by smooth sandstone ledges that cross the creek evenly, like steps. Downstream the live water before me stills, dies suddenly as if extinguished, and vanishes around a bend shaded summer and winter by overarching tulips, locusts, and Osage orange. Everywhere I look are Creekside [*sic*] trees whose ascending boles against water and grass accent the vertical thrust of the land in this spot.²⁵

The world opened by the references of the text is a world populated by the plants, the trees, and even the water, all of which are no longer the background but the center of the world, making them meaningful. In this world, the parts of the natural world do not just exist; they vanish, arch, and ascend. These various elements of the natural world are here presented as being active, expressive, and as being kinds of agents—which will be unfamiliar to the person who has always seen elements of the natural world as mere objects or means. When the reader follows the references of the text, he or she encounters a world where the parts and whole of nature are seen as significant, meaningful, and ultimately as being *alive* in a much more significant way than mere biological existence suggests.

What has happened then is that the reader has experienced a change, not just in his or her

²⁴ Gadamer uses the term application, *Truth and Method*, 306-310; while Ricoeur uses the term appropriation, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 177-178. For both, application/appropriation is not bringing the meaning of the text into my situation but understanding myself differently in front of the text.

²⁵ Annie Dillard, *The Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 87.

perception of the world but also in his or her own self-understanding. This person has, as Ricoeur would say, enlarged her horizon.²⁶ Through the text, this person may now understand herself as living *with* nature in a very meaningful way, or may just view the environment or nonhuman others in a more positive way. Ultimately this person has an experience that changes his or her perception of the self in relation to the environment—a transformed environmental self-understanding. This is, admittedly, a rather optimistic view of what can happen to the reader of nature writing—importantly it is what *could* happen, not what *does*. The very possibility itself is what is most significant here.

Beyond a more traditional notion of text as the written word, we might consider a more expanded notion of text. In particular, fellow environmental hermeneuticists have argued for reading nature itself like a text. Forrest Clingerman argues for a model of understanding the “Book of Nature,” which highlights how our sensory experiences of nature are very much still meaningful, like other texts.²⁷ This is further elaborated in the way that Clingerman addresses the challenges of understanding nature *as* a text, which is not quite the same as *through* the text.²⁸ Martin Drenthen gives a similar consideration in his argument for reading landscapes in particular like a text. Drenthen notes how our reading of landscapes is likewise shaped by cultural context and how we can have new meanings through re-reading the land.²⁹ So our sensory experiences of nature do still fall under the same hermeneutic and narrative considerations as more mediated forms of experience—even if the operations of human sensory

²⁶ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 178. Gadamer refers to this as the “fusion of horizons,” *Truth and Method*, 304-306. The fusion or enlarging of horizons relates to application and appropriation, discussed above.

²⁷ Forrest Clingerman, “Reading the Book of Nature: A Hermeneutical Account of Nature for Philosophical Theology,” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 13, no. 1 (2009): 78.

²⁸ Clingerman, “Reading the Book of Nature,” 80.

²⁹ Martin Drenthen, “New Nature Narratives: Landscape Hermeneutics and Environmental Ethics” in *Interpreting Nature*, 233-235.

capacities do not involve language, our understandings of such data do. And so literary, media, and even sensory experiences of nature are all possible and real elements in the hermeneutic relationship between self-understanding and understanding the natural world.

The philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur show how literature and other forms of media may potentially affect environmental views, and how literature or any “text” that may be interpreted generally can affect a person’s environmental self-understanding. Again, this could readily apply to various encounters—both with different kinds of media as well as sensory encounters with nature.³⁰ This could also apply to texts that may have anti-environmental references—the changes in value and identity discussed here work both ways. Nonetheless, when we understand experience hermeneutically, we can see how various types of experience of natural environments can change not only a person’s environmental values and view on nature, but also her very self-understanding insofar as it relates to the natural environment. Our consideration of environmental self-understanding and values has several important implications.

What is first and foremost important about this consideration is to re-affirm the unavoidable relationship between self-understanding and understanding of the text or the world. The consideration of nature writing, while only a small example, serves to reinforce a central idea of the present work: *environmental values are dependent upon environmental self-understanding and identity*. A person’s take on the environment depends largely upon the *milieu* of values, meanings, and judgments that every person is always projecting onto the world, or the pre-understanding that is also our self-understanding. Interpretation does not merely follow self-understanding, but it also does not escape it. My interpretation of things in the world can at times

³⁰ I am deliberately avoiding the term “direct experiences” here. According to hermeneutics our understandings of our sensory experiences are still mediated by language, so the term ‘direct experience’ as a contrast to mediated experiences is misleading.

run against the meanings I project onto them—otherwise we would never have new meanings. At the same time, however, interpretation is always affected by my pre-understanding and self-understanding. My understanding of the environment, in a hermeneutic framework, cannot be fully independent from my self-understanding.

The immediate corollary of this is that disagreements over or attempts to change peoples' environmental values are necessarily difficult issues precisely because we are dealing with identity. While small changes in value and self-understanding certainly do happen on a regular basis, a radical change in a person's view of the environment or environmental values might well require a notable change in self-understanding. This is problematic for environmental ethics, much of which continues to rely on universalistic rational arguments of environmental value as if *any* rational person would be swayed by such arguments. The same could be said for the kinds of arguments found in environmental ads and editorials, among others.³¹ Also, regular public discourse on environmental issues, even if done with an unusual amount of clarity and reason, may still well be ineffective due largely to this fact. Any argument – rational or not, written, spoken, or imaged – will be interpreted by a person, in a specific context, who is projecting his or her prejudices onto the issue being interpreted. Recall the double meaning of the phrase “*all such understanding is ultimately-self-understanding*.” the understanding of any text will influence a person's self-understanding, but also a person's understanding of any text will likewise be influenced *by* his or her self-understanding.³² Differing environmental values are often based on different (self-)understandings, which are difficult to reconcile. The issue of self-

³¹ Brian Treanor, working from a narrative perspective, makes a similar argument that facts and rational arguments alone are insufficient to change our environmental values and actions; *Emplotting Virtue: A Narrative Approach to Environmental Virtue Ethics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 150-153, 179-181.

³² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 251.

understanding and the overall interpretive framework illuminate certain difficulties for ecological discourse as well as for general environmental advocacy. To be clear, this problem has always existed, it is just more readily apparent through hermeneutics. Rational arguments, in whatever form they may take, are ultimately interpreted, and therefore may not necessarily be very effective if they are dealing with either truths or norms that are highly contrary to a person's held views and identity.

Self-understanding and environmental conflict further relate to shared ecological values. Each individual's self-understanding, including the distinctly environmental aspects of it, is ultimately related to many elements: texts, dialogues, and *other people*. Just as one's own environmental values can shift or change, so can others' own values; this is particularly important when considering those we are close to, who might be more likely to affect our self-understandings and environmental views. It is important to remember that changes in environmental understanding do not necessarily mean greater concern for the natural world; such changes can always move away from ecological values. Regardless, environmental self-understandings do exist in relation with those of other people. This can help to reaffirm and solidify environmental values when such values are shared in communities, However, as noted above, it can also be problematic in the case of conflicts. The interplay of environmental identities is examined further with narrative identity below, while the issue of disagreement in environmental value is considered further at the end of the chapter. The problem of conflicting environmental interpretations is ultimately shown to be a primary issue of a hermeneutic environmental philosophy.

I want to elaborate further on two important aspects of environmental identity and values: the causes of such change, and positive versus negative shifts in environmental value. The first

aspect regards the variety of experiences that can affect change in a person's environmental self-understanding. When discussing changes in environmental interpretation above I focused on actual text in nature writing, but I also noted in passing that various kinds of experiences could also affect this change. I want to emphasize here the majority of human experiences could *potentially* impact one's environmental interpretations. One of the key principles of hermeneutics is that people exist in different worlds of meaning, shared within historical traditions, and with each world is its own horizon of understanding. That world of meaning exists precisely because our experience of the world is usually mediated by language. In regard to the matter at hand, any experience that a person interprets as saying something *about nature* effectively is saying something about nature to that person. This could include literature or other media that do not have explicit environmental themes, as well as those that do. In terms of sensory experiences this could be anything from a park within a city to a pristine wilderness area; from encountering a wildflower on a sidewalk to standing at the base of an old growth tree. Cases like wilderness experiences or reading texts with clear conservation themes are more likely to change people's ecological views, but this does not mean other experiences will not. *Not every experience is going to have a relevant impact on a person's environmental self-understanding, but potentially any meaningful experience can.* This also means a greater variety in how people interpret and re-interpret themselves and the natural world, as we react to different experiences in different ways.

To further consider environmental self-understanding, we need to make a distinction between environmentally positive and environmentally negative understandings. By 'environmentally positive understanding' I mean to refer to interpretations, generally speaking, that involve a significant level of care or concern for the natural environment or nonhuman life. This would include environmental care based primarily on human well-being as well as concern

for the environment's own sake. To label such views as 'positive' from the outset is admittedly to beg the question, but some clear valuation terms are necessary to move forward. By contrast then, 'environmentally negative understanding' refers to interpretations, generally speaking, that involve a distinct lack of care or concern for the natural environment or nonhuman life. This could include a range of views from more passive apathy about the environment to actively viewing the natural world as strictly a consumptive resource for human use.

The distinction between positive and negative understandings of the environment is important for considering environmental self-understanding. It has to be remembered that a re-interpretation of nature or a new environmental self-understanding, through any kind of media, will not necessarily be a positive one, and will not necessarily lead to a more caring or sympathetic understanding. There is no reason why a person cannot gain or re-affirm a negative or ecologically apathetic understanding through various experiences; after all, our society historically and currently has a large number of understandings that view nature instrumentally and are presumably rooted in experiences and various media. Further, it must be recalled that the author's intentions have little bearing on this matter. Both Gadamer and Ricoeur sharply distinguish between the intentions of the author and the meaning of the text—the author's intention is only a secondary issue behind the primary matter of the meaning of the text itself. A piece of literature or media that was initially intended to have a positive environmental message could be interpreted negatively—and this would not necessarily be an invalid interpretation. The potentially equal validity of positive and negative interpretations of nature is discussed more fully later in the work when I give full consideration to the difficulty of truth and environmental values.

In summation, then, a hermeneutic consideration of the environment must necessarily

involve self-understanding, which is central to philosophical hermeneutics. Through a hermeneutic concept of environmental understanding, we can see how environmental interpretations and values exist dialogically with one's self-understanding. Changes in environmental self-understandings, and thus in one's interpretation of the environment, can occur through encounters of the natural world via text as well as other mediations. However, such changes can occur in various directions and do not necessarily constitute an increase in environmental concern. A central problem that arises in the consideration of environmental self-understandings is that environmental disagreements are likewise ultimately related to self-understanding, making them much more problematic. Nonetheless, hermeneutics shows the possibility for changes in environmental self-understandings and values.

Having examined the concept of environmental self-understanding through hermeneutics, I turn now to narrative. This is based primarily on the kind of narrative theory that builds on philosophical hermeneutics, as seen in the work of Ricoeur and associated thinkers. While hermeneutics allows us to lay out the basic relationship between self-understanding and understanding nature, narrative allows us to elaborate further on the notion of environmental identity and the diverse elements it encompasses.

Narrative Identity and the Environment

As we move from hermeneutics into narrative, we might shift from speaking of self-understanding to identity. This is a subtle shift; with self-understanding I am speaking more of one's interpretation of the self, as well as one's pre-understandings that are projected in interpretation and the co-constitution of the two. Speaking of identity from a narrative standpoint necessarily includes self-understanding, but further encompasses the many elements that make up one's full identity. In speaking of environmental identity, I am referring to narrative identity

as it relates specifically to environmental others, ideas, and concerns.³³ As with hermeneutics, there is a crucial relationship between identity and understanding.

The primary model that Ricoeur gives for narrative understanding is that of threefold mimesis, which is an expansion on the hermeneutic model of interpretation. The first aspect of this is prefiguration or mimesis₁, which parallels pre-understanding. My basic interpretation of the world, like my understanding of a story, is mediated by basic structures of symbolic meaning and temporality. The second aspect is configuration or mimesis₂, which is also referred to as emplotment. Through encountering narratives, I come to see more clearly the connections between various parts of the story and the story as a whole. This includes events, various elements, and time—all of which is elaborated on below. The third aspect is refiguration or mimesis₃, which Ricoeur compares to Gadamer's notion of application. This is when I fully comprehend the meaning of a narrative, in such a way that I can apply this meaning to my lived world of action.³⁴ The circle of mimesis parallels the basic hermeneutic circle, only now expanded to include the more detailed elements we see through narrative understanding. Reviewing mimesis through environmental identity shows more clearly how this concept builds on interpretation.

First, however, it is necessary to elaborate on configuration, or the mediating function of narrative. Ricoeur defines narrative emplotment as “a synthesis of heterogeneous elements” that provides a structure and intelligibility to life.³⁵ Emplotment mediates between individual events

³³ Recall my definition above of environmental identity as “an individual's understanding of herself as it is related dialogically with her understanding of the human-nature relationship, of nonhuman others, and of the natural environment as a whole.”

³⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1: 54-70; Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 132-134.

³⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1991), 21.

and the unified story, between individual components and the story as an overall causal sequence, and between the story as a succession of events and an overall unified whole.³⁶

Emplotment, to quote Ricoeur at length, “organizes together components that are as heterogeneous as unintended circumstances, discoveries, those who perform actions and those who suffer them, chance or planned encounters, interactions between actors ranging from conflict to collaborations, means that are well or poorly adjusted to ends, and finally unintended results”³⁷ Ricoeur here refers to a broad range of elements, to a great many different aspects of stories that are also various aspects of life. This is one of the key features that narrative adds over hermeneutics, where we shift from mere self-understanding to the fullness of identity: the unity that configuration gives to a complete life.

Threefold mimesis is not just an expanded model of understanding but also a fuller concept of identity, showing how we understand our lives like stories. First, life is prefigured as a narrative; even without being understood as such, there is something about human life that is inherently understood like a narrative is, with different symbolic and temporal elements forming a whole. Second, narrative configuration brings together multiple incidents or events into a unified life story. Just as a fictional story is the unification of many singular events and various elements, narrative selfhood is the configuration of many events, elements, and others into the unified whole of one’s life. It is in encountering stories that I see the configuration of different elements that make up not only a narrative, but also my identity. A critical aspect of this configuration is concordant discordance, the way in which unanticipated elements become necessary parts of the story. Things that are new, unexpected, and even jarring come into a

³⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 141-142; “Life in Quest of Narrative,” 21-22.

³⁷ Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” 21.

person's life (discordance). However, as a life story continues on, these discordant elements become key parts of overall whole of the story (concordance). Narrative configuration thus transforms events from being contingent to being necessary: as a part of the life story that makes up one's identity, things once unexpected become *essential* parts of the unity of a life and the fullness of one's identity.³⁸

Last of all is refiguration, the act of understanding and return to the self. After configuration, one's self is more fully understood as a narrative, and possibly understood in new ways. Refiguration is the where stories meet the life-world; where the structure of the text is applied to identity and the lived world. This provides one with a new self-understanding, as well as an opening of new possibilities, understanding potentially new ways to act and to be.³⁹ The detour back to the self through narrative largely parallels the concepts of fusion or enlarging of horizons and of application or appropriation discussed in the previous section; genuine understanding of the text occurs when we understanding ourselves differently in front of it.⁴⁰ However, the added dimensions elaborated on in emplotment is fruitful for our discussion of environmental identity, to which I now turn.

Emplotment, Identity, and Nature

As the first half of this chapter has already discussed text and self-understanding, I want to focus on the various aspects of emplotment to consider what narrative in particular adds. First, recall that emplotment brings the various elements of a life into a unified whole. From the perspective of environmental identity, we might consider the events that most significantly affect

³⁸ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:64-68; *Oneself as Another*, 141-143; "Life in Quest of Narrative," 21-22.

³⁹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:70-71; "Life in Quest of Narrative," 25-26; Kearney, *On Stories*, 132-133.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur explicitly connects refiguration to Gadamer's notion of application and the fusion of horizons; *Time and Narrative*, 1: 70; "Life in Quest of Narrative," 26.

a person's views of the natural world and the self in relation. To share a personal example, I went on a camping trip at Jay Cooke State Park, in Minnesota along the St. Louis River, several years ago. One day I went on a long walk around dusk along the river that included getting lost, almost falling in, and a few hours of reflective solitude surrounded by trees and water; this event helped reaffirm my appreciation of nature and commitment to environmental values, and my own self-identification as an environmentalist. This event is, to me, not just a thing that happened but one of many events constituting my overall identity.

To fully consider event as related to the natural world, we might consider how event relates to places a person has lived or grown up in. A person who grew up in a rural area regularly exploring a nearby wood may, for example, feel a special affinity for forests and view themselves as someone who cares for and is connected with wilderness. Growing up near a wood is not exactly an event *per se*, but would include many individual events that, woven together through narrative, constitute growing up there as a kind of second order event. Events also do not necessarily tend towards environmental consideration; a person may have a negative experience in the wilderness, for instance, that causes her to view nature as something threatening or uncivilized. The above examples lean towards encounters with the natural world, though any event that impacted a person's consideration of the environment would apply as well.

The examples here give single events for the sake of simplicity; in reality any individual person would have many events both ways that taken all together constitute her environmental identity.

The most important aspect of event for our consideration is how narrative brings these all together. The main point is not the impact or meaning of this or that event alone.⁴¹ The main

⁴¹ In contrast, environmental philosophers do at times over-emphasize individual events. For example, the famous wolf scene from Aldo Leopold's "Thinking Like a Mountain" is often cited as an important transformative event, *A*

point is how that many separate events ultimately constitute a single story. My environmental identity is not based on falling in the river or seeing a glacier face-to-face or reading a compelling piece of eco-fiction; it is based on all of those taken together, along with many other things. To be clear, not every encounter or incident necessarily constitutes a significant event, but the ones with a noticeable impact on a person's own values and self certainly do. Just as the more major encounters are part of the central character's arc in a story, so these encounters, as events, make up a major part of an individual's identity. The narrative unity of events is important because when I am considering my own environmental values, I am considering many events, even if I am not fully aware of it. Likewise, the environmental values and identity of the other is made up of many events that are significant to her; this raises the stakes on conflicting environmental values, which we return to below.

I discussed above how emplotment brings together diverse elements into the unified story or identity. One thing of particular interest for environmental consideration is how these elements, like events, include place or setting. Circumstances, for example, maybe include growing up in or near a particular kind of natural environment; someone who was raised near the ocean and another person who was raised near the desert might have quite different particular environmental views, even if both generally care about the natural world. Discoveries could include, among many other things, discoveries involving landscapes (finding a new natural area or unexpectedly learning the natural history of an area) or environmental others (encounters with

Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 129-133. For a conceptual example, Arne Naess' 'identification-with-nature' likewise places emphasis on a single event that has sweeping changes on one's view, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, trans. and ed. David Rothenberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 171-173. As a counterpoint to Naess, Jonathan Maskit argues that identification-with-nature is a long and slow process, possibly with back-steps, "Deep Ecology and Desire," in *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, ed. Eric Katz, Andrew Light, and David Rothenberg (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 224. Building on Maskit, I would say something like identification is possible if we think of it as a process over many events, unified by narrative into a single story.

animals, perhaps) particular to a region. There is far more that could be said about this, but it is worth noting at least briefly how setting is included here.

We might also focus for a moment on how this range of elements includes characters or others. A few aspects given by Ricoeur of this narrative synthesis mention people directly, namely interactions between persons and people engaging in or being affected by action. Focusing in on interactions, we can consider a few examples of how this relates to environmental thought. Sharing a family tradition of outdoor appreciation with relatives, attending a college lecture and having class discussion on sustainability, and having debates with significant others who see only instrumental value in the environment are fairly straightforward examples of this. Recall that these interactions include conflicts as well as collaboration; a person might be sharing a nature experience or having a discussion with someone who shares similar views on the environment or could be interacting with someone who fundamentally disagrees. It is worth noting that these kinds of interactions include both setting and character; interactions happening with particular others in particular places.

Another aspect of employment that is helpful is concordant discordance, the way that initially unexpected events become necessary parts of oneself. This is important as we think about the many elements that make up environmental identity, and the ways in which a person's identity changes over time. An individual may find herself in unexpected circumstances, unplanned encounters with others, etc. that end up changing her views on the environment and its value. Above I mentioned, as one example of interaction, a debate between one person who values the environment and another who does not. When we consider the overall narrative unity of a life, the same person might find herself at one time arguing against environmental value (or animal rights, etc.) and at another time arguing for environmental (or animal) value. In the

preceding section of this chapter I mentioned how through a new interpretation one could have a new view on environmental values and a new self-understanding; this change in one's view of the environment would be a discordant event at the time, but this shift in self-understanding comes to constitute a necessary of one's identity. Environmental identity includes not just a person's current view of herself in relation to the natural world, but all the past views and changes in between.

We have considered, if only briefly, the relevance for environmental identity of two of the three main mediations done through emplotment: narrative synthesizes both separate events and various elements into one story. The third synthesis is the shift from succession to configuration; from a series of incidents in time to a temporal whole. Out of the things that occur and pass through, we find the enduring flow of a life story that can be followed.⁴² This consideration of a totality in time relates back to changing environmental views. The temporal succession of my life involves holding many different views of the natural world at different times; these are not separate things, but rather an evolving view over time that is a part of the unified life of a continuous, changing environmental self.

An aspect of narrative that deserves a moment of special consideration is the axiological nature of beginnings and ends. Ricoeur mentions this both in the synthesis of disparate elements (referring to means and ends) as well as in the temporal aspect. If we think of narrative identity as a past, present, and future, these are connected not just through time but through convictions. Narrative identity consists in both the look back and forward; in tracing our projects both back to the initiatives that began them (in our past), but also to their desired ends (our future).⁴³ This is

⁴² Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1: 66-67; "Life in Quest of Narrative," 22.

⁴³ Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 21-22; *Oneself as Another*, 162-163.

part of how a person judges her own life to be better or worse, by looking at how she is doing against the backdrop of both what she has done in the past and what she wants to do in the future. Overall, then, narrative is what ties together not only the disparate elements but also the past and future of a life. My own understanding of myself as a person, relational to my views on the environment, relates heavily to my past. Am I a better person, ecologically speaking, than I was before? Am I following through on the environmental goals and initiatives that I set for myself in the past? Likewise, this relates heavily to the narrative projection of my future. Am I on the path to achieving environmental goals I set for myself (lowering my ecological footprint, becoming more knowledgeable of environmental issues, etc.)? Am I on the right track to being the kind of person, environmentally, that I want to be? We return to this question in the next chapter under the narrative understanding of action; for the present, at least, it is necessary to touch on how narrative identity relates not just temporally but qualitatively to both one's past and future.

When we think about nature, narrative, and identity, we see how these things are all tied together. Events, places, others, and my past and future are all most properly understood not as discrete elements but as part of the total narrative that makes up my views on nonhuman others, the natural world as a whole, and my own self in relation. It is only through narrative configuration, through the emplotment of my life, that I can fully understand the many factors that all together make up my identity. And likewise, it is through narrative that I understand the constant circle between my identity and the many interpretations that together constitute my overall view of the natural world.

A further aspect of narrative identity is that it is something that is always live, something that is always retold and reinterpreted. As we encounter new stories and as we recount our own

life story, our own understanding of our own self changes. Ricoeur notes that “we never cease to reinterpret the narrative identity that constitutes us ...”⁴⁴ I discussed above all the different elements that relate to one’s environmental identity. As new events and interactions occur, such as a new experience in the wilderness or an important conversation about ecological value, these add to and over time change my environmental identity; recall the concordant-discordance thesis, whereby new things that are a contrast at first become a part of the overall whole of one’s life. Further, as I encounter new environmental narratives, I may understand my self and the natural world—and particularly the two in relation—in different ways. Even re-telling my own stories about nature experiences or anything that relates to the environment may cause new interpretations of those stories and of myself. Narrative identity, including the aspects that distinctly make up environmental identity, can always possibly change.

A further aspect to consider is how we might view the natural world itself as a kind of narrative.⁴⁵ It is common to speak of nature, but “nature” is not actually a thing as such; it is not a definite object. Animals, plants, and insects can be spoken of as nonhuman others, and species, wildlife communities and even ecosystems can be spoken of as either communities or as quasi-others.⁴⁶ And yet we often use the term nature loosely to refer to any or all of the above. The narrative model is actually a very helpful way to understand what nature is: habitats and landscapes as settings; nonhuman others—in individuals, species, and communities—as

⁴⁴ Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” 32.

⁴⁵ Clingerman makes a very similar point in “Reading the Book of Nature.” His specific argument differs in that he focuses on thinking of nature as a text and further focuses on the metaphorical aspect of the term ‘nature’. My analysis is similar to his in the general consideration of how narrative can help make sense of our understanding of the natural world. Clingerman, “Reading the Book of Nature,” 72-91.

⁴⁶ This line of thinking is influenced in part by James Lovelock’s concept of the “Gaia Hypothesis,” which describes the Earth as a whole as being a kind of super-organism, “Gaia as seen through the atmosphere,” *Atmospheric Environment* 6, no. 8 (1972): 579-580.

characters; ecosystem processes, species migrations, evolution, and natural history all unfold over time. It is fairly common to colloquially use ‘nature’ in a way that can refer to any or all of these, but it makes much more sense understood through a narrative model. The term nature, even when used strictly in reference to the nonhuman world, is a complex signifier that points to various things all at once; narrative theory can help us further understand just what is often meant by the term nature. Nature itself may, therefore, be understood better through narrative.

The important take away from all of this is that environmental identity and, in relation, values are based on a complex myriad of factors, and that these things always in motion. My environmental values and identity are based on my past experiences, my future plans, my interactions with others, the places I have been, the ideas I have encountered, and many other things all tied together into a narrative whole. And environmental identity and values are always changing as well. Insofar as my environmental identity develops further over time, there is good reason to think my values could change again and my identity will continue to develop. This is a thread I continue to develop through action and imagination in future chapters, and something I ultimately return to when we consider the full normative implications of hermeneutics and the environment. Now that we understand what is involved in narrative identity, I intend to turn to what this reveals about our consideration of others.

Narrative, Nature, and Others

An important follow-up to the narrative configuration of the self is understanding how this relates to others, as well as the implications of this for environmental values. Each other person in the world has a life story that is similarly made up of different elements. Many other people have had far different experiences with and of nature than I have. And many other people have far different backgrounds and lives—different narratives—shaping their views of the

environment. For example, someone who grew up in a very materialistic community with little regard for the environment, someone who grew up in a community of conservationist hunters, and someone who grew up in a community with a kind of earth spirituality are all going to have very different background narratives that will affect their respective environmental identities. The possible varieties are near endless, but the critical point is the realization that *every person has an emplotted life, an environmental identity based on a narrative unity of numerous events and elements*. While I can never understand another person fully in the way that I understand myself, it is nonetheless a critical realization that every human life is a narrative, that the other is a self just as much as I am.⁴⁷

The realization of the narrative constitution of others leads to two related points, one relating to environmental conflict and the other related to overlapping narratives. The first follows through on my ideas from the preceding section about the conflict of environmental interpretation, and what narrative environmental identity means for conflicting views of nature. My view of the natural world is based on my identity and is in fact in a constant dialogue with it. Now with the full scope of narrative identity, we can see the great many number of factors (events, circumstances, characters, settings, etc.) that are a part of that identity and shape my views of the environment. I argued above that disagreements over environmental value are very difficult, once we fully understand such disagreements as a conflict of interpretations resulting from different environmental identities. An understanding of narrative identity adds force to this point: disagreements over environmental values are essentially conflicts of environmental interpretations, narratives, and identities.

When I challenge another person's views on and valuation of nature, I am also indirectly

⁴⁷ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 192-194.

challenging the other's environmental identity. To be clear, I do *not* mean to suggest that I am challenging every aspect of the other's selfhood, or that I am directly challenging her identity as such. I am, however, challenging an interpretation that is dialogically related to that person's narrative identity, and therefore related to the many experiences and encounters that shaped her identity and interpretations. When I confront or challenge the environmental views or values of the other, I may not merely be challenging a held opinion, but may implicitly be challenging many factors of the other's past and identity. Understanding narrative environmental identity implicates the reason behind the difficult nature of such conflicts.

An example may be fruitful here. To take a somewhat easy one, let us say I am having a disagreement with an avid hunter. She believes that hunting is fun, morally acceptable, and that as a human being she has every right to kill lesser beings (animals) for sport. I, in contrast, argue that hunting is depraved, severely morally wrong, and that nonhuman animals are morally equal to persons. Just on the surface level, my challenge to her view of hunting is a challenge as well to her views on animals and, relationally, people. Beyond that, she may implicitly or even unconsciously take this as a challenge to many different things: a family tradition of hunting, conversations with friends related to the positive value of hunting, and perhaps positive hunting experiences (like her first kill) as major life events. In challenging her views of hunting, I am implicitly challenging the positive dimension of these traditions, conversations, and events. In return, if she dismisses my views on the value of and respect for animals, she is likewise implicitly challenging the encounters and events that led me to have those views, and in part challenging my identity.

This explains in part why environmental debates can be so contentious. If in challenging another person's views I am implicitly challenging her environmental identity and the many

narrative elements bound up in it, it should not be surprising that she may feel attacked or may be resistant to my point of view; the same thing works both ways, as to why I may be offended when others challenge my views. Simply put, the challenge is not to a simple belief but to the many elements that together make up narrative identity. A narrative understanding does not make it easier to get around this problem, but it does help us to understand the problem more fully. A further issue that follows from this when we look at value debates is the question concerning who is right. To what extent, if any, can one person's narrative understanding and identity be said to be more valid or true than another's? Can one person be said to be morally right, and another wrong, based on a narrative conception of truth and ethics? These are difficult questions that I take up again later in the work.

The second point following from the narrative consideration of others, which relates back to the first one, is the interweaving of narratives. Ricoeur notes that in literature we often find the "framing of one narrative within another," giving us "a model of intelligibility."⁴⁸ Through the narrative model provided by the text, we better understand the entanglements and interactions of life stories, the way our identities constitute and are influenced by interweaving narratives. This happens on multiple levels. First, just as other persons constitute characters in my own life-story, so I exist as a character and influence in the life stories of others. Further, this also means that one's own identity is related to the larger narrative of one's community, as well as the social and cultural narrative identities that exist as a kind of higher-order socio-cultural narrative.⁴⁹ An individual's narrative identity, as much as it exists as an individual unified life story, also exists

⁴⁸ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 162-163.

⁴⁹ The existence of community and socio-cultural narratives does not suggest a meta-narrative in a sense that should imply greater truth or validity; rather, the reference to such narratives and identities as "higher order" merely refers to the move from individual to community and society, etc.

as a part of a group of overlapping identities to which it contributes and by which it is influenced. While we speak of narrative identity, this always exists in a web of relationships with other identities.

This relates back to the points above about misunderstandings and conflicts in environmental views. Among the many elements that are synthesized into the narrative unity of an individual's life, there are a myriad of cultural and social elements. When I disagree with another individual's environmental values, not only am I challenging various aspects (event, interactions, etc.) of her own life story, I also may be challenging aspects of the larger communal, cultural, or societal narratives which lend themselves to and makes up part of that identity. Likewise, I may feel my community or culture is being challenged when others disagree with me. This circles back to the questions above regarding difficulties with truth and moral rightness in moral disagreement. Disagreements over environmental values and conflicts in views of the natural world are difficult because they are not simple disagreements, but rather relate to deeply held beliefs, various elements of our backgrounds, and ultimately our own self-understandings and identities.

Environmental Capability and Conflict

Having a basic understanding of a hermeneutic and narrative conception of environmental identity and values, I want to reflect a moment on the takeaway from this before we move on. Thinking about a hermeneutic/narrative environmental identity, I want to focus on the environmental relevance of two themes: capability and conflict. I intend to look briefly at each of these at the end of our investigations into identity, action, and the imagination. We then circle back around to these concepts as we look at the normative challenges for environmental hermeneutics and our conclusion.

First, I want to focus on *environmental capabilities*. The importance of human capability can be seen as a theme throughout Ricoeur's work.⁵⁰ The central concept of hermeneutics is not that the self was historically effected or understood through interpretation; it is that the self is always and continuously historically effected, always being understood and re-understood through interpretation. Interpretation and self-understanding are always ongoing; identity and values are always the path to different possibilities. Likewise, the narrative configuration of the self is always ongoing. The importance of concordant discordance is the way that new, unexpected, disruptive things happen become part of one's overall life story; a person's narrative identity continues to incorporate these things into who one is. Further, we are always reevaluating ourselves in the narrative tension between past and present, between who we have been and who we want to be. A critical take away from this is that as human beings we are always capable of being different, of understanding things in new ways, and of existing and acting in ways other than before.

This is a critical point for a real environmental ethic. Human action and existence, from the perspective of environmental ethics and environmentalism, is both normatively problematic and practically destructive in relation to the natural world. A hermeneutic-narrative consideration of self-understanding and identity shows us that we are capable of being ecologically otherwise than we are. Self-understanding and identity are always determinable; insofar as they are never fully separate, understanding and value are likewise.

On the flip side of this is *environmental conflict*. I went more in-depth with this in the previous two sections, but to reiterate briefly a significant problem is how we deal with conflicts

⁵⁰ David M. Kaplan, "Paul Ricoeur and Development Ethics," in *A Passion for the Possible: Thinking with Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Brian Treanor and Isaac Venema (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 112-114; Richard Kearney, "Capable Man, Capable God," in *A Passion for the Possible*, 49-57.

in environmental interpretations. Disagreements in environmental views and values are not simple or basic disagreements. They are, first of all, based on different interpretations and different understandings, which have no external objective measure by which to resolve them. Further, such disagreements are ultimately not just conflicts in beliefs; they relate back to self-understanding and life stories, events and interactions, cultures and societies, and ultimately back to identities. Conflicting views over the natural world are conflicts of environmental identities. This makes any kind of resolution or even basic consensus far more difficult, which will have significant moral implications.

Applying the basic model of hermeneutic understanding to the environment shows how environmental values are relational with self-understanding. Our attitudes towards to the natural world are interpretations that are wrapped up with our understandings of ourselves in relation to the environment. When we add narrative configuration to this, we see how environmental identity is based on a synthesis of a wide range of things, enriching but also complicating the relationship between self-understanding and understanding the natural world. There is a positive and a negative to this. On the one hand, interpretation is always ongoing, so environmental views and values can always change. On the other hand, this means also that environmental disagreements are deeper and more difficult than we typically want to think they are. Our consideration of identity is only one piece of the picture; we turn now to consider how this relates to practice and mediation, to action and the imagination.

CHAPTER 3

INTERPRETATION AND NARRATIVE IN ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION

I have argued that self-understanding and identity are the foundation of how we understand and value the natural world, making them crucial not just for environmental hermeneutics but for environmental consideration overall. This consideration is ideally the theoretical partner to the practical human-nature relationship. That is to say that the full value of critically examining environmental identity comes in when we use it to further understand environmental action. Further, action was one of the major concerns of Ricoeur's work, so applying his ideas to environmental concern without considering action would be remiss. Ricoeur's heavy emphasis on meaningful action is one of the reasons that his work is such a potentially rich ground for environmental philosophy and provides for a very instinctive meeting ground between hermeneutics and ecological thought.

My focus in this chapter, then, is environmental action, by which I mean *action viewed through its relation to some aspect of the natural environment or the human-nature relationship*.⁵¹ The hermeneutic insight I draw on is that *actions are never mere acts, but are also meaningful*. And yet, action is what actually changes the world, and so are likewise rarely 'mere' meanings. As with self-understandings, the meaningful nature of action illuminates the full difficulty of conflicting views on the environment. My analysis turns in the second section to narrative considerations, including the symbolic rules of action and the goals of meaningful life. Last of all I revisit capability and conflict as they relate specifically to environmental action.

⁵¹ The importance of this distinction is that environmental action as I use it does *not* simply refer to action that is physically connected to the natural environment in a direct way.

First, however, I offer a hermeneutic examination of environmental action, beginning with the consideration of action as a text.

Environmental Action as Text and Interpretation

For Ricoeur, there are four major traits that show action itself to be a text, and therefore open to a similar interpretive model.⁵² The first of these traits is the fixation of action. Action is viewed, experienced, and ultimately understood through words, creating a connection between text and action. This allows us to understand action through terms usually reserved for speech or text, such as propositional content and illocutionary force. Thus, there are two parts to action: action as a person doing something (the propositional content) and action as what has been done (the illocutionary force). While the actual doing something that constitutes action is an event that appears and disappears, there is still *what has been done*, the inscription of action as a meaning that remains. Ricoeur employs the metaphor of saying an action has “*left its mark* on its time.”⁵³ The full understanding of this phrase is ultimately shown through the three remaining criteria of text as action.

Applying this to ecological concern, first there is the fixation of *environmental* action. Again, there is the *doing of* the action, the occurrence that appears and fades as an event, but also the meaning of the action, which is inscribed and remains over time.⁵⁴ Regarding the doing of the action in environmental concerns, this can be throwing away garbage, eating a factory-farmed steak, riding a bike instead of driving, or planting a new tree; the physical act can take minutes or hours, and be repeated over days or years. But what remains either way is both the

⁵² Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 150-152.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 148, original emphasis.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 150-152.

meaning and the impact. The meaning, what has been done, figuratively remains over time; we think about and remember objects wasted, resources consumed or saved, new ecological life, etc. In addition to the meaning, the metaphorical marks on time, there are also the literal marks made: the growth of landfills, the losing ground of forest to the tides of agriculture and development, the haze of pollution across a city skyline, the actual planting of new trees or protection of species. Ricoeur's metaphor gains a double meaning with environmental concern, as we see both the meaningful and physical impacts of action.

The second way in which action is like a text is autonomization—the way in which action is removed from the intention of the agent. Whatever the intention of the agent, actions are viewed with a meaning, possibly good or bad, that is separate from that intention; the history or memory of an action contains an autonomous meaning.⁵⁵ The separation of intention and meaning is highly relevant for environmental consideration. My actions have both a meaning to others and a practical effect that are distinct from my own intentions; for example, others might see diets heavy in meat consumption as ecologically destructive, while those with such eating habits are simply satisfying taste. For environmental actions, the separation of intention and meaning also involves repetition and scale; I might not think of my own drive to work as environmentally bad, but the widespread daily use of automobiles is regarded by many as a strong contributor to various ecological problems. Historically many actions and social patterns of the past are now viewed as environmentally destructive or irresponsible, whatever the original intentions may or may not have been. Ecological destruction is both practically and meaningfully distinct from whatever good or neutral intentions were present at the start; this is an important point when we return to considering environmental ethics and conflicts in meaning.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 153-154.

The third trait is for an action to have relevance or significance beyond its original situation. Meaningful action can overcome the particular conditions of its production and reoccur in new social contexts.⁵⁶ An environmental example is the development of what is now the United States by European colonists. With the view that the wilderness lacked value until it was cultivated for human use, the people of the time set a precedent of action for the conquering and transforming of undeveloped areas.⁵⁷ The people of the United States presently live in a different social context; we now know that the view of infinite resource was a flawed interpretation—resources are not only finite, but some are becoming scarce. And yet, despite knowing better, we often continue the precedent of converting nature into development. It is not uncommon for urban development to consist in expansion, even if and when this means ignoring opportunities to repair and reuse areas that have been developed and fallen into neglect. In many cases the original action of developing the frontier continues, as development persists in new buildings and the conversion of rural into urban, rather than the reuse of old urban areas. The original precedent of development thus continues—far beyond their origins, the early acts of expansion and development are re-signified over and over again through our current practices. On the other hand, we also see cases where our new understanding has caused an opposition to expansion. A notable example is the preservation of undeveloped or slightly developed areas as National Parks, National Forests, and other wilderness or wildlife reserves.⁵⁸ Much like text, actions reoccur and are re-evaluated in new contexts and situations.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 154-155.

⁵⁷ Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 40-41; William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *The Great New Wilderness Debate: An Expansive Collection of Writings Defining Wilderness from John Muir to Gary Snyder*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 473.

⁵⁸ Mark Woods, “Federal Wilderness Preservation in the United States: The Preservation of Wilderness?” in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, 131-133.

The fourth and final trait is that action, like a text, is an open work. The interpretation of an action can reasonably change over time. The original reading of the action is not privileged over the contemporary one, which likewise may give way to new understandings in the future.⁵⁹ Let us again use the example of the European colonization of what is today the United States. This settlement was, at its time, interpreted as a right and the destiny of the European people. It was colonization in the sense of exploration, new development, new growth; a new life for both the people and the land.⁶⁰ Those same events now are commonly interpreted as an injustice; it was colonization as both destruction of wilderness and the subjugation of native peoples. The intention of the early colonists and the early generations of the United States may not have been to ruin a vast wild area, and they may not have seen a moral wrong in their treatment of others. But our new interpretations of the past, with our current understanding of the planet and of people, give us a much different interpretation today.

The various examples used here are only potential examples among many, and admittedly did tend towards actions that are now considered to be environmentally harmful actions. Nonetheless, these examples illuminate how hermeneutic insights can help us understand environmental action. Environmentally destructive actions may be fleeting in their occurrence, but the meaning and impact remains. People may not have environmentally negative intentions at the time, but the actions of the past have present, possibly destructive, relevance. And any action may be reread or reinterpreted in new ways. Despite intentions, the society of the time, or the apparent insignificance of the initial act, our actions leave marks both physical and meaningful that remain over time.

⁵⁹ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 155-156.

⁶⁰ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 40-41.

To briefly summarize the analysis of action so far: action can be understood, in many ways, like a text. First of all, though actions occur in instances, they leave a kind of trace that remains and can be reinterpreted. Secondly, text is detached from an author; though an author wrote a text, the text ultimately stands on its own, and is interpreted in ways that may escape the author's intention and certainly the author's control. Ricoeur notes that action is a social phenomenon; the roles of agents are intertwined, and their actions inevitably have meanings they never intended. Taking this point further, the meanings of actions reoccur in new contexts and are revised over time. The critical aspect here is that actions have readability, similar to a text, and thus are open to a range of interpretations.⁶¹ With the readability of environmental action in mind, I turn now to hermeneutics of action as a function of self-understanding.

In the previous chapter it was noted that interpretation was necessarily tied to self-understanding, which is also true regarding action. All interpretation is based on the projection of meanings and values, our prejudices and pre-understandings, and interpretation likewise affects future projections and understandings. Actions are meaningful, and that meaning again involves the movement between parts and the whole. The individual actions of an agent taken together form the 'text' or whole that is that agent's ecological mark on the world. In turn, the individual actions are interpreted within the context of the larger whole of the agent's overall actions. This is one level of the hermeneutic circle; single acts together make up the larger whole of one's overall action, and likewise the whole shapes the interpretation of single acts.⁶² If an individual frequently acts in ways considered ecologically responsible (recycling, using public transportation, etc.) then her actions generally, that is to say as a whole, might be viewed as good

⁶¹ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 150-156.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 158.

environmental action. In turn, a lone act of wastefulness, against the overall arc of that same agent's actions, would be understood as ecologically bad or irresponsible.

In addition to the relationship between part and whole, action also falls under the distinction between explanation and understanding. We often have different understandings of environmental actions, and relevant explanations can help us to sort out better and worse understanding; as with text, an explanation can take us from a guess to a comprehension of environmental actions.⁶³ Explanations in this case could include the natural sciences or local knowledge, among other things. A simple example involves recycling and food packaging; putting used cardboard in the garbage, rather than recycling, could potentially be debated as being wasteful. When it is explained that in some cases food packaging cannot be recycled, such as cardboard saturated with grease, it narrows the related set of understandings down. And so further information changes our potential understandings of environmental practices.

Action, as stated above, is ultimately a meaning that extends beyond the physical event of the action. Because of this, there is a distance between my self and the action being interpreted; the meaning of the action goes beyond the intentions or history of the agent and is outside of the original social-political context of the initial event. This distance allows me to further understand the meaning of an action through application. It is when and because meaningful action must be understood beyond the intention of the agent and outside of its original context that I can fully understand the meaning of an action in the world I inhabit. Because action is meaningful—because it likewise falls under interpretation, understanding, and application—understanding action is ultimately self-understanding. In the case of environmental action, the interpretation of action would relate to interpretation of the environment; so, understanding environmental action

⁶³ Ibid., 160-162.

relates dialogically with both self-understanding and understanding of the natural world.

All of this is very important for understanding the actions of ourselves and others. First of all, in a very significant way a person's own actions are interpreted by herself. While it is true that one usually does have a purpose or intention in mind when doing an action, what is relevant is the meaningful impact that remains afterwards. Every agent essentially interprets his or her own past, present, and projected future actions. To what extent I view my own actions as helpful, neutral, or harmful to the natural environment relies on my view of the value of the natural world and most fundamentally on my own self-understanding, as well as the relationship between the two. If I view myself as an ecologically responsible individual in a world with a valuable (and threatened) natural world, I will interpret my own actions in a context of reducing or avoiding environmental harm. In this scenario I might view certain of my actions as wasteful or ecologically harmful, and thus feel negatively or guilty about those actions. This is all based on my interpretation of my actions, reading my own past action like a sort of text.

A different view of the self will mean different interpretations of action will be as well. If I view myself and all humanity as dominant, and the planet as resources for human use, my interpretation of action will be in accordance with that. Actions which may be environmentally harmful are understood as being positive based on non-environmental criteria. This different view is based on my intertwined understandings of my self and the natural world, which shapes my interpretation of my own as well as others' actions. Regarding this point, I noted above that all actions are meaningful, which is true in the sense that all actions are imbued with meaning. But if we consider the colloquial use of 'meaningful' as 'relevant or important,' then how meaningful an action is will vary. Take a simple example, like throwing a plastic water bottle in the garbage: if I am more environmentally concerned, I would view this act as wasteful and

wrong. But for a person who is more apathetic towards nature the same act might not conversely be good, it just would not matter. While the act in both cases has a meaning imbued on it, that meaning is more apparent or significant in one case than in the other. With a basic analysis of interpreting environmental action in place, we can turn now to practical understanding and awareness, as well as to interpreting the actions of others.

When looking at action, our interpretations often involve judgments of those actions as good or bad. What is significant for environmental action is that these judgments are often based on our individual and collective understanding of the practical effects of those actions. Further, this understanding often changes over time, and is often times largely an issue of awareness. This can be seen sharply in the arrival of environmental concern overall. Before environmentalist authors such as Aldo Leopold or Rachel Carson made society largely aware of the very idea, let alone the moral connotations, of the destruction of the natural environment, actions were rarely interpreted as environmentally negative or even as being environmental actions. To clarify, what I mean is that actions at that time were not commonly considered in terms of environmental impact one way or the other.⁶⁴ Actions were viewed as positive or negative based solely on human goods such as money, health, or even culture. The naturalist-scientific writings of people like Leopold and Carson re-shaped our understanding of the natural world and, more importantly, of the effects of our actions on that world.⁶⁵ The impact of these authors' works is so interesting hermeneutically because they raised *awareness* of the value of natural world and of the practical human-nature relationship. What their work primarily did was to shift the context or horizon within which environmental actions were interpreted.

⁶⁴ Recall that I defined environmental action above as “action viewed through its relation to some aspect of the natural environment or the human-nature relationship.”

⁶⁵ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*; Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

In further considering awareness and practical effects, we might consider recycling as a narrower and more current example. Long considered as a good thing overall by environmentalists, recycling has grown in public awareness and practice. Today it is a common practice in most businesses and many households in the United States, based on the widely shared understanding of the practical environmental benefits of recycling. Such considerations, and whether a person accepts them or not, will change interpretations of throwing an item away instead of recycling it as being wasteful. And so, in considering the interpretation of action we must not only consider self-understanding, but also scientific and practical knowledge, which will shape whether we view certain actions as environmentally positive or negative. The ecological value we place on actions is something that does change over time, and further such changes in value are often linked clearly with our practical understanding of action.

A final consideration of the specifically hermeneutic view of environmental action is considering the actions of others. Just as I interpret my own actions, I am constantly interpreting others' actions in various ways, including understanding them as being ecologically good or bad. Importantly, this relates back to self-understanding on two levels: being an interpretation, my understanding of the actions of the other is related to my self-understanding; at the same time, the others' interpretation of her own actions is likewise related to her own self-understanding. If I have a different interpretation of the others' action than she does, particularly if these interpretations differ over values judgments, then we have a real environmental disagreement. To briefly give an example, imagine if a person goes on a cross-country road trip by herself in a car. Based on her own self-understanding and related views of action, she views this as liberating, meaningful, and overall as a good thing, and most importantly regards the environmental impact as justified by the benefit to herself. In contrast, I interpret this same thing as wasteful, self-

indulgent, and overall I view the environmental impact as wrong and unjustified. This is not to argue either of us is right or wrong, but we have different interpretations, based on deeply held views, of the same project and actions.

This brings us back around to the twin problems of environmental disagreement, which I raised in the previous chapter. First, such disagreements are problematic because we approach them as being about actions, but what is being argued over is the interpretation of the *meaning* of the action; in other words, we treat environmental disagreement as being over facts when they are actually disagreements over interpretations, identities, and values. Secondly, and in relation, ethical disagreements over action, since they are based on interpretations rooted in self-understanding, are often taken by each party as an attack by the other on themselves as a person. As a result, environmental disagreements are often fairly volatile and difficult to resolve; treating environmental ethics as an objective ethical debate does not help this problem in any way. The problem of the actions of others, and the ethical implications of this, are best dealt with under the consideration of narrative.

In summation, then, an integral element of a hermeneutic consideration of the human-nature relationship is environmental action. Actions are fixed through language, separate from the intention of the author, meaningful over time, and ultimately interpreted. Through a consideration of environmental action what this ultimately means is, first of all, that actions are distinct from the intentions of agents, but also possibly from their understanding as well. There are many cases in which agents not only do not intend a negative environmental impact but also may not even see how their actions are ecologically detrimental. Further, action is tied to my own environmental self-understanding and understanding of the natural world, and in relation to these I am actually interpreting the actions of my self and others. This means that disagreements

over environmental actions relate back to a conflict of interpretations and also conflicting environmental identities. With this in mind, I turn now to a narrative consideration of environmental action; this both adds depth to the interpretive aspect of action, as well as further illuminates the conflicts involved with it.

Narrative, the Environment and Symbolic Action

As with identity, I want to revisit environmental action via narrative, which both supports and takes further the hermeneutic considerations of the previous section. We are working again within the narrative framework discussed in the second half of the previous chapter, which examined the ecological self through three-fold mimesis: prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. I briefly resketch that analysis with an emphasis this time on action. However, I want to emphasize aspects of narrative theory that are particularly relevant to action, beginning with a further look at the constitutive rules for action in relation to the environment. I also go briefly into Ricoeur's concepts of the good life and self-esteem, looking at how these explain difficulties in resolving or changing ecological action. By 'environmental action' I again mean *action viewed through its relation to some aspect of the natural environment or the human-nature relationship*. A narrative consideration of action overall helps to both more fully understand environmental action and elaborate on the related interpretive conflicts.

In the previous chapter I provided an overview of Ricoeur's narrative theory with an emphasis on environmental identity. A brief revision of that, with an emphasis on action, is helpful in our consideration of environmental hermeneutics. First, recall threefold-mimesis, the ongoing cycle through prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. I already understand my life, including my actions, implicitly as a narrative. As I encounter stories (configuration) and apply them to my own life and practices (refiguration), I may come to understand my own

actions in different ways.⁶⁶ Turning to environmental action, my own understanding of my past actions change as I encounter new narratives and apply them to my own life. It may be a case where an action I had thought was environmentally good is now seen as environmentally bad, or the reverse. Alternately, it could be a situation where I had not seen an action as being environmental one way or the other, and I now understand that type of act as having ecological significance. As I encounter different narratives, either fictional stories or others' accounts of life, I may see new or different ecological significations of my own past acts. At this most simple level the narrative understanding of action follows from the narrative understanding of identity and the hermeneutic relationship between identity and action.

A further point I want to revisit through action is the narrative unity of life. As discussed in the previous chapter, the significance of narrative identity is the way in which it brings together disparate elements into a unified whole. Just as a story has settings, events, and characters, an individual's identity includes her past, future goals, places, events, and people—all of which are understood as an interrelated whole.⁶⁷ The same applies to environmental action, which is understood as a part of a collective life story including past, places, and others. However, we should be careful in how we consider action in this context. My individual day-to-day actions may not fit *directly* with this narrative unity; after all, it is not as though each single act forms a significant part of my own life story. However, we might consider action as tendencies or characteristics.

An aspect of an individual being the main character in her own life story is the characteristics that she has, or her tendencies to act in certain ways. Furthermore, she likewise

⁶⁶ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:52-71; Kearney, *On Stories*, 132-133.

⁶⁷ Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 21; *Oneself as Another*, 141-142.

views others as having certain characteristics. These might be tendencies towards environmental actions (recycling, public transportation, etc.) or might be tendencies that include environmentally destructive practices (heavy use of fossil fuels, heavy meat consumption, etc.).⁶⁸ The important point here is how these characteristics, in oneself or in others, are understood within a narrative framework. An individual's view of her own and others' environmental characteristics as positive or negative is related to place (geography and culture), others (family, friends, community), and major events. This is really an extension of the point in the previous section tying action to identity, but it further shows how complex this relationship is.

To more directly include action, we might consider the way actions are given symbolic meaning through narrative, particularly through the constitutive rules for action. Ricoeur initially describes this as a part of prefiguration, examining how our understanding of the world includes the symbolic meaning of various acts.⁶⁹ These are conventions that, he elaborates, “[give] an initial *readability* to action. It makes action a quasi-text for which symbols provides the rules of signification in terms of which a given conduct can be interpreted.”⁷⁰ Under constitutive rules, *which are pre-understood by human agents*, behaviors become meaningful actions or practices.⁷¹ This is, for example, what makes waving your arm or hand a form of greeting in many cultures. Further, these symbolic meanings are largely a part of social and communal narratives, rather

⁶⁸ I hesitate to label tendencies directly as environmentally destructive, as it seems it would be rare that an individual would view their own tendencies that way. If I do not really care about the environment I may frequently engage in acts that are practically harmful for the environment, but I probably do not think of them as “ecologically destructive,” although others might view them that way.

⁶⁹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:58-64; *Oneself as Another*, 154-156.

⁷⁰ Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 29, original emphasis

⁷¹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 152-157. To say that the constitutive rules of action are pre-understood is not to suggest that these are somehow innate; it is rather the fact that we understand the meanings established by them before we explicitly understand them *as* symbolic rules. For example, an individual knows that waving one's hand is a form of greeting whether or not she thinks of such as a symbol or contemplates it as a meaningful act.

than individual ones. I understand my own actions and those of others, both of which I interpret, through these shared symbols and unwritten rules that define various practices.

Our narrative pre-understanding, then, contains basic rules which shape how we interpret actions. At its first level this is merely descriptive, but on a further level it opens up the ways in which actions are evaluated, seen as done well or poorly. I earlier used the example of waving hello as a greeting; beyond that, a cheerful greeting of others may be viewed as friendly or good, while failing to wave back to an acquaintance might be viewed as rude or bad.⁷² And so with many actions, there is a normative dimension to meaning. Furthermore, the constitutive rules for action relate to individual and also to communal or societal narratives. To continue with the same example, if I consider myself to be a particularly friendly person it may be more important to me to greet those I know with enthusiasm, and I may expect others to do the same. Further, social rules vary with regions and cultures over appropriate levels of greeting. The ways in which actions are understood as being done well or poorly involves an interplay between our own narrative identities and the larger sociocultural narratives in which we are embedded.

A good example for transitioning into environmental concern is the act of eating. While we might think of eating as more of a simple description, different symbolic rules structure what is considered appropriate ways of eating; these vary by time period, region, class, occasion, and so forth. For example, upper-class homes in past times had more rigid rules for appropriate eating; for another example, different regions have different dishes that are considered staple foods; and so forth. For an environmental example, we might consider eating red meat specifically. For many people in the United States, eating red meat is not really thought of in

⁷² Ibid., 155, 176. Though the constitutive rules of action have an evaluative or normative element, they are not deontological moral rules (as Ricoeur explicitly notes on pg. 155).

environmental terms, but is considered good (healthy, delicious, masculine) or bad (unhealthy in excess) by other standards. And yet, considered in relation to the environment, eating red meat might be considered unethical or wrong in a couple of ways (cruel to animals, ecologically unsustainable); or it might be thought of as good (supporting farmers). The understanding of eating meat as ethical or unethical and as ecologically good or bad might be based on individual narratives, or shared narratives within certain subgroups. For example, vegetarianism is more common on the West Coast and Northeast and in wealthy suburban areas, based on shared narratives about both health and environment. Likewise, high red meat consumption is more predominant in the Midwest and South, and in rural areas, based on competing narratives about health, animals, and the environment. And so, we see that narratives provide, on both individual and communal or societal levels, symbolic understandings or rules that shape if and how we put environmental judgments on day-to-day actions.

A narrative consideration of environmental action is, like the hermeneutic framing in the first section, most fundamentally about interpretation. One might interpret throwing a plastic bottle away as “wasteful” or “ecologically irresponsible” in a way that is both descriptively and normatively conferring a negative value; or one might simply see it as an insignificant act of disposing of waste. Similar types of judgments could be made regarding consuming meat, driving an automobile instead of using public transportation, and so on. The basic point is that under narrative actions are likewise *interpreted or understood* as being positive, negative, or neutral.⁷³ What narrative adds to the discussion beyond hermeneutics is to show many different elements are involved in that interpretation, and how it further relates to communal, cultural, and

⁷³ By “neutral” I mean interpreting something in a way that is neither positive or negative. In such a case I would probably not notice or be aware that I was interpreting something as being value neutral; rather, since my interpretation of it lacks any value significance, that interpretation would probably be more in the background of my thoughts – which does not change the fact that I am still interpreting that act.

social influences.⁷⁴ Further, the narrative concept of meaningful action more clearly highlights how our interpretation of action is based on multiple layers of meaning, with various elements of individual and shared narratives. A further element of narrative to consider is the good life, which helps us further consider the problems of environmental interpretation.

The key features of a narrative consideration of action, as well as some of the challenges we have been addressing, can be examined further by looking at Ricoeur's narrative variation of the ethical conception of the good life.⁷⁵ This stems from his narrative ethic: "*to aim at the good life, with and for others, in just institutions.*"⁷⁶ The good life is defined by Ricoeur as "the nebulous of ideals and dreams of achievements with regard to which a life is held to be more or less fulfilled or unfulfilled."⁷⁷ In other words, this is the collective and interrelated set of goals and ends a person has for herself, against which she judges her actions as good or bad and her life as well-lived or not. Actions, then, are not only measured against their immediate effects. Rather, one's actions, at least the more significant ones, are further oriented toward and measured against an ultimate end, the good life. And so, there is a circular interpretation between the more important decisions one makes and her conception of the good life, paralleling the unending interpretation between the parts and the whole that constitute the model of the text. This adds a substantial element to the ever-present interpretation of the self. Related to this, for Ricoeur, is his take on self-esteem: the understanding of oneself as being capable of good

⁷⁴ To be clear, these elements and influences already exist in the idea of interpreting action—bound up in prejudgment, which shapes how we interpret text, actions, and our selves.

⁷⁵ I have previously addressed the relevance of Ricoeur's ethic and the good life for environmental concern in Bell, "Environmental Hermeneutics with and for Others," 143-147.

⁷⁶ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 172.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

judgment and by extension good acts.⁷⁸ Action and identity relate in the understanding of oneself as someone who can judge and act well—that is to say, a judgment of oneself as a good person.

How a person views her actions, the actions of others, and action in general all rests on her view of the good life—and this is no less true of environmental action. Whether a person views particular actions or tendencies as environmentally good or bad depends on her view of the good life, particularly the aspects of this that relate, even indirectly, to the natural world. A few comparative examples make this clearer. First, consider someone who views the good life as being wrapped up in financial success and material goods, which is not uncommon today in the United States. For this person, acts like always purchasing the newest technology or frequent long-distance travel could be considered consistent with the good life; these acts might have a high ecological toll, but her view of the good life does not necessarily include environmental concern. In contrast, if a person's view of the good life includes strong concern for nature, she might consider the newer technology and extensive travel as ecologically destructive, and potentially as unnecessary. Practices that avoid heavy resource use or are otherwise considered 'sustainable' would be likewise viewed as good actions, as living well. Of course, there are extensive possibilities in-between the two polar examples I used here. The critical element is the *ecological good life*; one's view of the good life as it relates to the natural environment, even if the relation is one of absence. The meaning of environmental action, then, is not merely an interpretation of action but is bound up with environmental identity and one's view of the ecological good life.

To elaborate further, this is not a simple issue of a particular view of the good life being environmentally positive or negative, but rather a complex set of ways in which one's view of

⁷⁸ Ibid., 179-180. This understanding is, for Ricoeur, an aspect of self-interpretation

overall plans and goals corresponds to actions that are good or bad for the natural world in different ways. One issue here is that life goals and projects are interpreted as good or bad, which can relate in various ways to environmental actions. I have been using the example of frequent air travel, as this is something that contributes to pollution and resource use; however, we might consider the various ways this might be interpreted. Consider again the person whose view of the good life is wrapped up in financial and material wealth; against this view she interprets frequent air travel to luxurious vacations as good. In contrast, think of an individual whose view of the good life includes seeing the world and experiencing other cultures; for far different reasons, she likewise interprets frequent air travel to far locales as a good act. This example is interesting to me precisely because many people, when looking at others, would disapprove of the former view of the good life, while approving more of the latter; and yet, both views justify the same act with the same material impact. This raises an interesting dilemma for a narrative environmental ethic, which may have to reconcile intentions and interpretations with the practical physical effects of actions on the global ecosphere. We return to this question at a later time; for now, it is important to note that the relationship between action and the good life is more complex than a simple dichotomy between good and bad.

Even within views that are inclusive of the nonhuman world, we will still see conflicting interpretations on the same actions. Consider two different people who have consideration of the natural world as an integral part of their lives, but in very different ways. The first is an avid outdoorsperson, conservationist, and hunter; the second is also an outdoorsperson and nature enthusiast, but a defender of wild animal life and an anti-hunting advocate. Both individuals understand appreciation and protection of the natural world as an integral part of worthwhile existence. However, the first views hunting as a positive action and a meaningful way to spend

time. The second individual, against a broadly similar view of the good life, views hunting animals as distinctly wrong, and in fact views fighting against that as a part of her meaningful life. The main point here is that even views of the good life that include the appreciation of nature as a fundamental part of a worthwhile existence can vary greatly on the details of what that means or what kinds of action that entails—this certainly gets much more complicated when we also consider views of the good life that do not significantly include the natural world.⁷⁹ Furthermore, the varying interpretations of the good life and (in relation) right action will involve disagreements and conflicts.

The narrative relationship between the good life and action thus highlights a problem we have been considering. I previously stated that conflicts over environmental issues and values are difficult because values are tied to identity, which explains both why people get fairly defensive over such issues and why people are sometimes resistant to changes in their environmental values. Considering the good life shows this more fully. Telling an individual that something they are doing is environmentally wrong might, in certain cases, clash against their sense of the good life. This depends on the action involved; for example, for most people suggesting that they switch to a reusable water bottle, and stop buying single-use bottles, probably will not cause a big conflict. However, suggesting to the world traveler that her lifestyle is ecologically irresponsible may cause issues, as it conflicts with her sense of the good life. Or, consider someone who sees cultural practices involving heavy meat consumption as an important aspect of her life; telling her that is ecologically destructive will, again, suggest that her view of the

⁷⁹ This point itself might require a bit of elaboration. Recall that the good life, in Ricoeur's usage of the Aristotelean concept, refers to the things that form the ultimate ends of our actions and ultimately our life goals. The natural environment certainly relates, in some manner, to every individual's life goals—but in many cases it will be more so as a subordinate end. To say that the natural world is not a part of someone's view of the good life means that it is not a main component of their overall view of meaningful ways to live well, not that it is entirely absent from it.

good life is wrong. In either case, even if she is not offended by being told her actions are irresponsible, she is unlikely to change her actions unless her view of the good life changes.

To further consider resistance to environmental change, we can bring in another concept from Ricoeur's narrative ethic. Self-esteem, in narrative, refers particularly to the understanding of oneself as capable of making good judgments.⁸⁰ It is important to emphasize two related points: first, that self-esteem is a form of self-interpretation; and, secondly, that self-esteem is about capabilities, not accomplishments.⁸¹ Self-esteem, to put it another way, refers to a person's firm belief in herself as having the capacity to make good moral judgments.

This view of self-esteem, following the above assertions about the good life, explains some of the resistance to furthering environmental responsibility. For an individual to accept that her personal actions contribute to environmental destruction might mean accepting that she has done bad environmental actions, possibly implying that her capacity for judgment was flawed—creating a conflict between environmental responsibility and self-esteem. We see this even in people with mainstream environmental awareness. Such an individual might recognize that some of her actions are ecologically problematic and that she could be more environmentally responsible; but still, as she considers herself generally competent in moral judgment, she might be hesitant to accept how much she may contribute to environmental problems. We see this further in disagreements over environmental action. To accept the other's contention that my environmental practices were wrong, and especially to change those practices, may mean questioning my own capability for practical judgment. As stated previously, this might vary depending on what kind of judgment and action is considered. To take a simple example, debates

⁸⁰ I have previously applied self-esteem to environmental concern, though with a particular focus on moral consideration of animals, in Bell, "Environmental Hermeneutics with and for Others," 147-152.

⁸¹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 179-181.

over “green” cleaning products would rarely cause a big conflict. However, to reuse examples from above, debates over things like food (particularly eating meat) or lifestyle (like frequent air travel) can cause large conflicts because the person who is being told her practices are environmentally bad may feel that she is implicitly being challenged on her capability for good judgment. To be told that I am committing bad environmental acts may be interpreted, if even subconsciously, by myself as a challenge to my view of the good life or my capabilities. It could be easier to deny my environmental responsibility or impact than to accept that aspects of my identity or judgment are so flawed. Further, this helps explain why changes in environmental practices may be slow—changes in identity or judgment may take time. The overarching point here is that the narrative concepts of the good life and self-esteem help explain some of the difficulties with changes in environmental action.

On the other hand, there are positive aspects to both self-esteem and the good life in this regard. Going with self-esteem first; while an individual may take environmental debates or responsibility as challenges to her ability to judge well, she might instead interpret such things as a call to responsibility. Remember that this concept is about one’s interpretation of oneself as capable of good moral judgment and action; confronted with the possibility of having done the wrong environmental acts an individual may interpret this, against her self-esteem, as a call to improve or do better. This issue could potentially result in either; since it is fundamentally an issue of interpretation, there is a variety of possibilities.

Likewise, there are potential positive elements to the good life in relation to nature as well. First of all, while views of the good life do not usually change simply or quickly, they do change. As mentioned before the good life is a form of interpretation, and under narrative theory interpretation is always ongoing. Interpretation and self-understanding can change over time to

include more consideration of the natural world as a part of living well. Furthermore, the good life provides a deep base for significant actions. If individual views change over time to significantly include environmental consideration as an important part of worthwhile existence, this provides a much more significant basis for environmentally positive action than simple moral precepts or even laws.⁸² Those who understand actions as good or bad against life goals that directly consider the natural world will have a much deeper and more significant basis for environmental action.

One last thing to consider regarding the concepts of the good life and self-esteem is a protentional problem that arises with them, or rather a continuation of a problem discussed in the preceding chapter. The good life and self-esteem are both elements of the always-ongoing interpretation between self and act, and like any other interpretation do not admit of easy resolution. To quote Ricoeur at length: “[self-esteem] provokes controversy, dispute, rivalry — in short, the conflict of interpretations — in the exercise of practical judgment. This means that the search for adequation between our life ideals and our decisions, themselves vital ones, is not open to the sort of verification expected in the sciences of observation.”⁸³ And so this raises a dilemma for us: can we adjudicate between better and worse ideas of the good life, considering better or worse in regard to the natural environment? Considering self-esteem, can we differentiate between good and bad environmental judgment?⁸⁴ Ricoeur notes further that “the

⁸² This is somewhat similar to Arne Naess’ view on identification-with-nature; when one’s “Self” includes nature, environmental consideration occurs organically and not as an external moral demand. While I do not mean to equate the ecological good life fully with Naess’ view of Self-realization, I am influenced by his views on deeply rooted consideration in contrast to external moral norms. Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 171-173.

⁸³ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 179-180.

⁸⁴ To clarify this sentence, I mean environmentally good or bad judgment in regard to considering whether our actions ought to be based on environmental concern; in contrast, if we mean acts that physically help or harm the environment, we have the natural sciences to turn to for verification.

adequation of interpretation involves an exercise of judgment which, at best, can aspire to plausibility in the eyes of others...”⁸⁵ While this does give us some ground for judgment, it is not immediately clear if this gives us a basis for strong moral claims. Can we, based on this, denounce goals and judgments that exclude (in consideration) and harm (in practice) the natural world? We return to this question in the fourth chapter. With a narrative consideration of action in place, I turn now to pick up the question of conflict and capability.

Capability and Conflict in Action

The last thing to consider briefly under action is again the idea of environmental conflict and capability. The previous chapter closed with discussing these as crucial hermeneutic ideas for environmental philosophy—the possibility for different interpretations relates simultaneously to both environmental conflicts but also the potential for better ecological capabilities. Turning to conflict first, we have seen briefly in this chapter how viewing action as interpretation illuminates several difficulties. While disagreements over environmental practices are at times treated like factual disagreements, clashing views on action are actually disagreements over interpretations—which are much more difficult to resolve. Further, the interpretive element shows how disagreements over action can tie back to identity and thus why disagreements over environmental acts can be so contentious. Through narrative theory we see how environmental action relates to my self-understanding of my capability for judgment and my view of a well-lived life. This relation helps show how changes in ecological action and environmental conflicts are difficult, while also leaving us without a clear, sure method for adjudicating such conflicts.

⁸⁵ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 180.

While a hermeneutic-narrative consideration of action highlights problems, it also raises positive considerations.

As with identity, environmental action relates as well to capability. Since environmental action is based on my interpretation of actions as good or bad, and interpretation is always ongoing, I have the capability for better environmental actions. We see this first in our hermeneutic consideration, where I have the possibility of new understandings of acts, and therefore of making my actions better in regard to ecological impacts. Further, touching on narrative again, my actions are judged against my view of the good life, which is open to reinterpretation and change—which is especially important as an ecological conception of the good life provides a deep foundation for good environmental acts. Further, my judgment of my own environmental capabilities can be re-evaluated in answer to my revised understanding of ecological responsibility. Meaning is always in play and actions are ultimately meaningful—and so the possibility is always open for better practices towards the natural world.

This brings us back to the relationship between identity and practice; insofar as self-understanding and action are unavoidably connected, capability runs through both of them. There is always the possibility of my understanding the natural environment differently and understanding myself differently in relation (my environmental identity). My self-understanding is largely an understanding of different possibilities, including different possibilities for ecological practices. Because I have the capability of being better (self-understanding), I have the capability of doing better (in terms of actions) towards the natural world.

The capability for changes in environmental action is very promising, but there are two important things we must remember about this: first, understanding allows for, but does not necessitate, changes in environmental action. On the one hand, my understanding of action

(environmental or otherwise) is based on my understanding of myself and the (natural) world, so a change in the latter two will open the possibility for a change in the first. On the other hand, the difference between value and practice is well known, perhaps especially in regard to the environment.⁸⁶ So while changes in understanding allows for the possibility of changes in action, it does not make it a certainty.

The second thing we must remember is where capability circles back to conflict; even if changes in action occur, this may not mean *improvement* in action. The judgment of something being “better” is itself an interpretation. From a hermeneutic-narrative standpoint, changes in action (mine or anyone else’s) can always possibly be ecologically better or worse, in a complex variety of ways. This is particularly important, and problematic, for the idea of a hermeneutic environmental ethic. We are capable of acting differently, but it is questionable whether and how we can designate what criteria would allow us to characterize better environmental actions. The full weight of this problem is something I return to later for full consideration. All the same, if we have any practical concerns regarding the natural environment then the capability for changes in environmental action is of critical importance; it is only because we have the possibility for changes in environmental values and actions that a genuine environmental ethic is possible at all. The full consideration of this requires a third examination, to which I now turn: the mediating function of the environmental imagination.

⁸⁶ Ben Hale gives an interesting discussion of the difference between our environmental values and the justification for our actions, *The Wild and the Wicked: On Nature and Human Nature* (Cambridge: The MIT Press 2016), 9-10.

CHAPTER 4

HERMENEUTIC ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION

The third aspect of a hermeneutic environmental philosophy involves the imagination, particularly Ricoeur's concept of it as a "productive power" related to interpretation and understanding. According to Ricoeur, the imagination should not be thought of as an adjunct to understanding and action; rather, the imagination is an integral part of both self-understanding and action. The imagination opens the space for and gives expression to new meanings. We can see this in three ways related to the environment. The imagination (1), gives rise to new interpretations of the natural world and new environmental values; (2) it allows for a new self-understanding, particularly in relation to the environment; and (3), it creates new possibilities for action, which are necessary to actualize changes in ecological values and environmental self-understanding. These three aspects of the imagination are integral not only to environmental hermeneutics but also perhaps of environmental philosophy.

After discussing the imagination in general, I turn to the narrative imagination. This helps to clarify and expand on the imagination's ability to foster new environmental understanding, identity, and action. In addition, the narrative understanding of the imagination not only relates to interpretations but also to ethical judgments of the natural world, as well as to one's sense of moral agency with respect to the environment. From there I turn to address the social imaginary and the ideas of ideology and utopia as they relate to environmental concern. Last of all, I end the chapter as I have the previous two, considering briefly how the imagination applies to the interwoven ideas of environmental capability and conflict.

Hermeneutic Imagination and the Environment

To begin, it is important to be clear on what I mean by hermeneutic imagination. I am

referring primarily to Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy of the imagination, as it is elaborated by Richard Kearney in *Poetics of Imagining*.⁸⁷ Kearney argues that the imagination is "the ultimate, if discreet, agenda of [Ricoeur's] philosophical project," even though the imagination is "less systematic than episodic" in Ricoeur's work.⁸⁸ Kearney gives his own cohesive systematization of Ricoeur's frequent but always provisional thought in this area.⁸⁹

The most critical aspect of the imagination is, echoing Kant, its productive power. Kearney argues that, for Ricoeur, the creative power of language requires imagining. The imagination is what allows us to create new meanings and to say things in new ways. This makes sense in the hermeneutic worldview, where the meaning of the text is both dialogical between the reader and the text and is superior to the author's intention. The imagination lies between "the being that is revealed" and "the language that is revealing" in interpretation, bringing the two together.⁹⁰

The creation of meaning ties in to both a new self-understanding and to the semantic creation of new worlds. It is through the imagination—in symbols, myths, or narratives—that we understand the world and ultimately understand ourselves. This is what allows us to encounter a new world through the text, but it also is what allows us to understand ourselves differently in front of this world. The imagination is crucial for the circular relationship between self-understanding, a reinterpretation of the self, and the world of the work.⁹¹ This relates to a major

⁸⁷ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 142-177.

⁸⁸ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 143.

⁸⁹ Ricoeur examines the imagination in, for example, the chapter "The Imagination in Discourse and in Action," in *From Text to Action*, 164-183. Kearney, however, looks at the imagination as it develops throughout Ricoeur's career; Ricoeur himself does not give a similar overview.

⁹⁰ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 147-148.

⁹¹ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 149; Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 171-179.

claim of hermeneutics for both Ricoeur and Gadamer; interpretation is always between the self and the text.⁹² For Ricoeur the imagination plays a crucial role in this relationship.

This brings us to the last element of the imagination relevant for the present work: action. The new worlds and selves that we can imagine are made real by action. It is only through action that I can make real the re-imagined world or the projected potential self. But this is a two-way relationship, because it is likewise through the imagination—the ability to imagine new worlds, re-understand my self, or project futures—that I am able to act in new or different ways. Further, I must envision what could be before I can act, so the imagination is necessary to realize freedom and to uphold or contest social practices.⁹³ We might think of the hermeneutic imagination along these three related aspects: the creation of new meaning (seeing-world-as), the dialogic of self-understanding and the world of the work (seeing-self-as), and the hermeneutics of action (seeing-action-as). This follows the larger work here; the first element is the central feature of hermeneutics and the latter two are the imagination's counterparts in my overall project.

Keeping in mind this overview of hermeneutic imagination, the question then is how might we apply this to the natural environment? And how does this relate to environmental self-understanding and action? We can begin by defining the 'hermeneutic environmental imagination,' which in my work refers to *the hermeneutic imagination, as the production of new meaning and possibilities, in relation to the natural environment*. This production of new meaning and possibility is integral to a hermeneutic environmental philosophy.⁹⁴

⁹² Recall Gadamer's assertion that "*all such understanding is ultimately self-understanding*," *Truth and Method*, 251, original emphasis. While both Gadamer and Ricoeur link understanding and self-understanding, Gadamer does not clearly affirm the imagination as part of this relationship. Kearney states that Gadamer "has not yet, to my knowledge, addressed the imagination directly or comprehensively," noting that Gadamer's infrequent use of the term defers entirely to Kant's notion of the imagination, *Poetics of Imagining*, 144-145.

⁹³ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 149-150; Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 173-174.

⁹⁴ Other scholars have also applied Ricoeur's specific view of the imagination to environmental concern, with two particular examples worth noting. Clingerman uses the imagination in reference to place, "Memory, Imagination,

I previously discussed changes in environmental views and values in relation to self-understanding: through some kind of encounter or experience a person comes to have some new insight about nonhuman others or the natural world—or in other words a re-interpretation of them. The imagination, the creation of new meaning, is what allows this new interpretation to occur and be expressed, for the re-interpretation of something is to ‘see’ it in a new way, to view it as something other than what it was before (‘seeing-world-as’). For example, a person who before viewed the woods as just lumber might now see (via the imagination) the forest as a biological community. Recall that the imagination is the productive function of human understanding, that which “liberates the reader into a free space of possibility.”⁹⁵ The imagination gives us the possibility to see the natural world as something (in this case a biotic community, beings that are *alive* in a meaningful way) other than what it was before (resources, a background of mere life).⁹⁶ The (re)interpretation of the natural world and changes in the human understanding of the environment are functions of the hermeneutic imagination.

This means, relationally, that the imagination is likewise the driving force behind changes in environmental values. As noted in the second chapter, there is often a direct link between understandings and value. With the seeing-as of the hermeneutic imagination, one could shift from seeing a forest, for example, as a lumber reserve to the possibility of seeing the forest as a community of meaningful life. This change in understanding is potentially also the opening from

and Place,” in *Interpreting Nature*, 255-263. Treanor discusses the imagination in his development of a narrative environmental virtue ethic, *Emplotting Virtue*, 145, 170-171, 177.

⁹⁵ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 149.

⁹⁶ My language use here relates to a distinction I made in a previous work between viewing something as “being-alive” or “mere-life.” The former refers to viewing nonhuman living things as *alive* with the same signification as human life, as meaningful and important; the latter refers to viewing something as merely living in a biological sense, a scientific fact which lacks the significance human life has. Bell, *The Green Horizon: An (Environmental) Hermeneutics of Identification with Nature through Literature*, MA Thesis (University of North Texas, 2010), 13.

seeing the forest as having economic value only to the possibility of seeing the forest as a proper object for direct moral consideration. To change the kind of value we place on something, including environmental others and biotic communities, requires the kind of change in understanding that is facilitated by the imagination.

The imagination, then, opens a space for different understandings and meanings, which includes the valuations that go with such understandings. From the standpoint of hermeneutics this must be a genuine opening, so it is difficult to say that changes in understanding or values that are environmentally positive are more true. There is no objective “up” or better in regard to shifts in meaning. Rather, the only thing that can be said to be objectively better is openness to new meanings, even if that might mean shifts away from environmental concern. Nonetheless, even if we cannot say that environmentally positive understandings are more valid, the mere possibility of such new meanings, and therefore the environmental imagination, is necessary for increasing environmental concern to even be possible.

Changes in interpretation and understanding occur often through mediated experiences, which means such changes occur through the world of the work; a possible world, opened through language and meaning, that can change how we view ourselves and how we view the world around us.⁹⁷ The imagination is crucial here, as it is a world opened up by the text *through the imagination*. This allows us to ascribe new meanings to our world, including the natural world.⁹⁸ The world of the work presents a potential world that reveals the natural world in a new way. These imaginative variations could allow us to see a possible future world in ruin or healed of its ecological wounds or anything in-between. This explains why nature writing,

⁹⁷ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 171-179.

⁹⁸ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 149.

environmental fiction, or other media can actually be so effective in changing environmental values; each engages the productive imagination through the world of the work. The imaginative act of encountering these potential worlds is not a mere simulacrum but an opening of genuine meaning—allowing us to see *our world* as ruined or flourishing.

The critical role of the imagination here, what it truly adds to a hermeneutic environmental philosophy, is that it fosters and encourages new understandings of the natural world. Recall the notion of the productive power of the imagination. Kearney identifies the imagination as “the act of responding to a demand for new meaning, the demand of emerging realities to *be* by *being said* in new ways.”⁹⁹ In terms of the environment it is the imagination, as an aspect of our meaningful existence through language, that not only allows but pulls us towards multiple views or meanings of the environment. It drives us to engage with environmental views other than those we already hold. Nature as a biotic community, or as a ground for spiritual human existence, or even as a mere resource are all realities that are there to be expressed—and it is the imagination that responds to those realities. While self-understanding and interpretation are the fundamental basis for our environmental views, the imagination is integral to foster new ecological values and shifts in environmental understanding.

A hermeneutic understanding of the imagination can elaborate how and why we give voice to new meanings in regard to the environment. It is important to address that the imagination here is not the same thing as abstract or objective reasoning. Considering the imagination’s role in understanding illuminates the point that changing views on environmental value are not merely about having good rational arguments or formulating abstract ethical rules, but that environmental values are about imagining the environment or nonhuman others in

⁹⁹ Ibid., 148, original emphasis.

different ways. Variations of this general point have already been argued in various areas of environmental philosophy. Treanor makes a similar argument, likewise drawing on Ricoeur, in favor of a narrative environmental virtue ethic.¹⁰⁰ Naess' deep ecology and Plumwood's ecofeminism both include arguments for the significance of our views on others over and above any kind of abstract moral reasoning.¹⁰¹ And in Weston's environmental pragmatism, the idea of immediate value emphasizes experience over arguments about environmental value.¹⁰² The emphasis of understanding over objective truth in environmental thought is not something entirely new, but it is something hermeneutics can give us in a new way. The hermeneutic environmental imagination, then, is another way to formulate the emphasis in some theories of environmental philosophy on experience and meaning over pure logical argumentation and ethical precepts. Since even rational arguments are interpreted, such arguments may not be enough to change environmental values. The environmental imagination, in contrast, can and does change environmental understandings. However, while the imagination can lead to new environmental interpretations, this does not necessarily mean those new interpretations will also favor environmental protection or align with others' views. It can even lead to understandings that give less consideration to the natural world. Certainly, the re-interpretations fostered by the imagination can lead to different and conflicting environmental views, so the advantages of this view for environmental ethics may be very limited.

Returning to the main elements of the hermeneutic environmental imagination, it relates

¹⁰⁰ Treanor, *Emplotting Virtue*, 178-181.

¹⁰¹ Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 169-171; Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 181. I also applied hermeneutics and narrative to Naess' view on this in Bell, *The Green Horizon*, 55-101.

¹⁰² Anthony Weston, "Beyond Intrinsic Value: Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics," in *Environmental Pragmatism*, ed. Andrew Light and Eric Katz (New York: Routledge), 292-303.

also to self-understanding (seeing-self-as). Recall that our understanding of the natural world shapes our environmental (self-)understanding, which in turn (re)shapes our understanding of the natural world and so on in a circular relationship. The imagination plays an important role in how and when we understand ourselves differently than before. It might, for example, allow someone who was environmentally apathetic to now see herself as someone who is wasteful or environmentally destructive, but no longer wants to be. This latter point is the most crucial part of the imagination in relation to self-understanding; a person not only sees herself in a new way, but new possibilities for being. Through the imagination a person sees who she is and sees who she could or wants to be.¹⁰³

To elaborate, the imagination's productive effect on self-understanding is twofold: first, on a descriptive level, it means that a person can see herself in a new way. The imagination can produce for me new viewpoints of myself, a new interpretation of self that is based on new interpretations of the world and the imaginative context of the world of the work. The second implication of the imagination for self-understanding is the normative side. It figures into who I could or want to be. The imagination opens up potential versions of selves, in contrast to a new self-understanding.¹⁰⁴ In seeing myself in a new way, I also get a glimpse of who I could be, not just in the world of the work, but in my actual world of action. For example, if I come to understand myself as someone who is wasteful or ecologically destructive I may, in relation, see a potential for myself to be different, to be an ecologically conscious person. This potential self is a possibility, not a necessity; still, it is through the imagination that I have the possibility of

¹⁰³ A similar train of thought exists in Charles Taylor's narrative view of self, which places identity between memory of one's past and projection of one's desired future, specifically as both are relate to one's own view of the good, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 46-52.

¹⁰⁴ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 149; Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 174.

changes in my (ecological) self.

The hermeneutic environmental imagination, therefore, is necessary for understanding ourselves and our possibilities in new ways. To fully understand the importance of the imagination we must further consider new interpretations of the natural world and new interpretations of our ecological selves *particularly as they exist in relation to one another*. The potential for people to see the world as having environmental value is tied to the potential for people to come to see themselves *as environmental selves*, which is to realize that selfhood is in some kind of relation to the world in its environmental aspects. Remember that the separation of interpretation and self-understanding is only an explanatory necessity; they are ultimately co-constitutive and always at play in a continuous circle. Environmental interpretations, values, and self-understandings always exist in relation to each other, with the imagination as the central mediator within and between them.

The movement of these interpretations, values, and self-understandings find their practical significance through environmental action. Changes in environmental values and self are lacking a certain level of ethical significance if they have no effect on the practical actions that cause environmental degradation and the related loss of human and nonhuman life. The new worlds and environments that we can imagine become a physical reality, if at all, by actions that shape our world; as Kearney notes, “the possible worlds of imagination can be made real by action.”¹⁰⁵ A person’s imaginative variants of environmental selfhood likewise come into actual being through a change in action, through a shift in the way one actually lives practically in the world. So new environmental interpretations only fully come into the world through a change in action, which likewise requires the imagination.

¹⁰⁵ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 149.

To elaborate, before I can act in new ways, I have to *imagine* myself doing so, to envision the possibilities for actions; it is through the imagination that I conceive of different meanings of action ('seeing-action-as'). First, through the imagination I try out schemes of action as means-to-ends and compare different practical and ethical rationales for action; I further imagine different ways of acting to test my own limits and assert my own capabilities to myself. These three aspects perform a progression that, according to Ricoeur, "points towards the idea of imagination as the general function of developing practical possibilities."¹⁰⁶ As an environmental agent with the capability of the imagination I can schematize my desired ecological ends (e.g. human sustainability, environmental preservation), evaluate my motives (e.g. broad self-interest, belief in ecological value), and ground my environmental practical capabilities (e.g. reduced fossil-fuel use, a sustainably diet). Further, it is through the imagination that we conceive of different possibilities for the world and the possible actions that might lead to that world.¹⁰⁷ Whether it is a more sustainable future or ecological harmony, the world I want and imagine is what elicits my imagination of environmental action. Environmental action requires an environmental imagination, particularly when we consider *changes* in action.

The imagination not only allows for new action, but through the imagination new understandings and new actions become bound up with each other. Kearney argues that through the imagination "the traditional opposition between *theoria* and *praxis* dissolves" and further notes that the imagination offers us "the freedom to conceive of the world in other ways *and to* undertake forms of action which might lead to its transformation."¹⁰⁸ Once we have a new understanding of the natural world and an ecological view of self (both opened through the

¹⁰⁶ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 177-178.

¹⁰⁷ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 149.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

imagination) we re-interpret our actions differently and see the realm of possible actions in order to fulfill that new self-understanding and act in accordance with that new ecological worldview. It is therefore through the imagination – the ability to imagine new worlds, understand ourselves differently, or project new futures – that we have the freedom for new or different environmental actions. It is not only new understandings of nature and of self that are necessary for changes in action, but also new considerations of action through the imagination.¹⁰⁹ Changes in environmental value, self, and action all occur in relation. Viewing the world otherwise, re-evaluating environmental self-understanding, seeing new possibilities for action, and projecting the future in terms of the environment all depend on the mediating function of the imagination.

The imagination, then, is a critical part of the human-nature relationship: it is what allows us to give new meaning to the natural world and what allows us to re-conceive our environmental selves—and to do these in relation to each other. Furthermore, the imagination is crucial to environmental action, as it is only when we can imaginatively envision the environment differently and project new futures that we are able to act differently. In Kearney's work on the hermeneutic imagination he quotes Ricoeur in saying that "there can be no 'action without imagination.'"¹¹⁰ Based on my analysis, I would extend this bold statement to the environment as well: *the imagination is necessary for environmental action and is therefore necessary to do environmental ethics at all*. A full understanding of the human-nature relationship, itself a prerequisite for making normative claims about the environment, requires the imagination as a necessary element of self-understanding and action.

In summation then, the imagination is not merely an element of a hermeneutic

¹⁰⁹ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 149-150; Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 177-178.

¹¹⁰ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 150.

environmental philosophy in addition to self-understanding and action, but also it is the thread through which we can (re)create our environmental selves, worlds, and actions. The imagination fosters new interpretations of our environmental self-understanding, values, and practices. And this mediation of new ecological interpretation through the imagination is a necessary part of a genuine environmental ethic. Turning to the role of the imagination in narrative allows me to both expand on this and further consider new dimensions.

Narrative, Imagination, and Nature

The narrative imagination, like its hermeneutic counterpart, is primarily related to the human capacity for new meaning.¹¹¹ As such, the main role of the productive imagination occurs with mimesis₂ (configuration), mimesis₃ (refiguration), and relationship between them.¹¹² First, the productive imagination has a key role in emplotment, configuring incidents, actions, and characters into a whole, and turning a temporal sequence into a story. And in this way the reader utilizes the imagination to complete the story, connecting the diverse elements to the main point or theme—which the reader then applies to her understanding of the world.¹¹³ The essential point of emplotment is the narrative understanding or comprehension, akin to practical judgment

¹¹¹ Insofar as narrative for Ricoeur is a continuation of hermeneutics, the narrative imagination is not entirely different from the hermeneutic one. That said, *Time and Narrative* and “Life in Quest of Narrative” both use the imagination specifically as an aspect of narrative configuration and are the two main sources of Kearney’s discussion of the narrative imagination in Ricoeur. In *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur uses the term imagination largely in the subsection “The Ethical Implications of Narrative,” 163-168; outside of this the term is sparsely used in that work. Regarding the chapter “Imagination in Discourse and in Action,” in *From Text to Action*, I mostly relegated ideas from that work to the first section of this chapter, though I use Ricoeur’s discussion of the social imagination in the next section.

¹¹² Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” 23-24; Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 161-162. Ricoeur and Kearney both note that the imagination, in the manner of a Kantian or Heideggerian synthesis, is present in pre-understanding (mimesis₁) as well; the key role of the imagination as a creative force, however, is located in emplotment.

¹¹³ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 162-163; Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1: 68.

(Aristotle's *phronesis*), that we gain.¹¹⁴ The role of the imagination applies further to the refiguration of my own real understanding through comprehension and application of the story. The key role of narrative (including the imagination) is not passing on information but facilitating the human capability of creating new meanings.

To elaborate further on this last point, the narrative imagination relates particularly to my understanding of my self, my actions, and the relation between the two. Ricoeur argues that “the significance of a narrative stems from *the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader*. The act of reading thus becomes the critical moment of the entire analysis. On it rests the narrative’s capacity to transfigure the experience of the reader.”¹¹⁵ Through the imagination the world of the text becomes a world of possibility, against which the reader compares her own lived world and actions. The application of the ideas of the world of the text to the reader’s real world constitutes the true understanding of the story (*mimesis*₂–*mimesis*₃), which Ricoeur compares to Gadamer’s notion of the fusion of horizons.¹¹⁶ A problem that Ricoeur addresses is the concern that there is a sharp difference between stories and life. He argues that this difference is bridged in the way the reader critiques her own self through the narrative, putting herself imaginatively into the roles of the characters from the stories that are most significant to her. As Ricoeur states, “it is therefore by means of the *imaginative variations* of our own ego that we attempt to obtain a narrative understanding of ourselves. . .”¹¹⁷ The creative aspect of emplotment is using the narrative imagination to understand my self and my world in new ways.

¹¹⁴ Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” 23-26. Ricoeur contrasts emplotment with a formal understanding of the story, which he respectfully relates to narratology.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 26, original emphasis. Though the terminology is slightly different, his use of transfigure here is essentially the same as what he elsewhere calls refiguration.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 26.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 33, emphasis added.

And so, the imaginative ability of seeing-as becomes a kind of being-as under narrative; the imagination allows me to project new horizons of possibility for myself through the world of the work. This being-as, the understanding of myself and my possibilities in new ways, is the productive role of narrative understanding.¹¹⁸ The imagination links the configuring act of narrative to the refiguration of my own self-understanding.

A key element of the narrative imagination specifically is the form of ethical thought experiment that it fosters. In the narrative encounter with the world of the work, the reader makes moral judgments and tries on different ethical roles through the characters. In the imaginary world opened up by the narrative, I both evaluate the actions of the characters and consider what I myself would do if I was in their position. In doing so, I further develop my own ability to link human conduct with flourishing and a well-lived life.¹¹⁹ In other words, narrative configuration does not just link together settings and characters, but rather emplotment links together means and ends, bringing together character, motivations, and projects. I noted in the first section how, for Ricoeur, the imagination gives me various possible courses for action. Furthermore, in the narrative imagination I question why characters do the things they do, and in turn I relate this to my own life, questioning my own motives and judgment. The narrative imagination thus links identity and action, connecting who I am with what I do.

It is important to emphasize that these thought experiments are *ethical*; I question not just what I want or not, but ultimately what kind of things I consider to be good or bad, and who I am as a morally capable being. Ricoeur argues that in the encounter with narratives “we never tire of exploring new ways of evaluating actions and characters. The thought experiments we conduct in

¹¹⁸ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 161-163; Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:80; “Life in Quest of Narrative,” 24.

¹¹⁹ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 242-243; Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” 22-23. Narrative is, for Ricoeur, tied to moral judgment. This is in keeping with Ricoeur’s adaptation of the Aristotelean notion of mimesis.

the great laboratory of the *imaginary* are also explorations of *good and evil*.¹²⁰ The reader has an opportunity to re-examine her ethical beliefs through the narrative, and perhaps step back and reevaluate the relationship between human conduct and the good life. These ethical thought experiments and reevaluations find their full significance in refiguration, changing the reader's actual views of action in her lived world.¹²¹ This relates back, last of all, to moral agency and the capacity for action. The ethical thought experiments of the imagination open up many possible ways of being, which prompts the difficult question of who I am in a moral sense. The self, pushed by the moral expectations of others in the lived world, is forced to give an answer to that question, to claim selfhood. However, this claim always faces doubts. The self, in a dialectic with the ethical demands of others, finds moral agency as a compromise between affirmation and doubt of oneself.¹²² And so, for Ricoeur the product of the narrative imagination is a self, a narrative identity, that includes the capability for moral action. Overall, the narrative imagination provides an individual with new understandings, including a relational understanding of self and action. This includes an ethical dimension, understanding good and evil as well as moral agency. I turn now to how this applies to environmental consideration specifically.

Narrative Imagination and the Ecological Self

To apply this to environmental concern, I want to begin by briefly revisiting, in a very general sense, environmental narratives. This sets us up to more properly see the relevance of the narrative environmental imagination. In the fictional narrative we encounter characters performing actions that have an impact on the environment; we often approve or condemn these

¹²⁰ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 164, emphasis added.

¹²¹ Kearny, *Poetics of Imagining*, 242-243; Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 164.

¹²² Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 167-168.

actions and imagine what we would have done in a similar situation. In a narrative rife with environmental destruction, for example, I might condemn the ecologically harmful choices of characters, and imagine how I might have done things differently. In doing so I ultimately confront my own actions. In imagining how I would act in the situation of the other in a narrative, I can see how my environmental actions are detrimental to myself or others. In imagining how I would act in a fictional world of environmental ruin, or how I might have prevented such ruin, I see how my lived actions are environmentally destructive. To go the other direction, I might see characters who protect nature or preserve an environment that is healthy for people and imagine if I were those characters and lived in that world. I then apply this imaginative variation to my own actions, and through the lens of the narrative see new ways to act and to be ecologically in my lived world. These imaginative thought experiments, conducted via narrative, find fulfillment in refiguration; that is to say in my own narrative (re)understanding of our environmental selves, the natural world, and ecological action.

To give an example of fiction and the environmental imagination, I want to return to Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. The novel, set in a fictional future of our own world, alternatives between the main character's present in a post-apocalyptic world and a telling of that character's life-story up to then. Though the apocalypse itself is not entirely due to environmental degradation, the main character's past ties together ecological catastrophe, human manipulation of nature, and a degraded quality of human life. In this fictional world some of the worst effects of climate change, such as rising sea levels and rampant fires, are already in the past. The story potentially encourages me to think of ecological ruin as a possible future in a way that simple facts could not achieve. The story further shows links between environmental ruin and a severe reduction in the quality of human life, inviting me to connect my own seemingly harmless

actions with and the degraded well-being of others through ecological harm.¹²³ While this brief example barely begins to cover Atwood's rich and complex narrative, it does help to show how fiction engages the environmental imagination.

The consideration of the narrative environmental imagination also includes history. While fiction is the more primary example, for Ricoeur a history is also a narrative with what he calls a "quasi-plot," "quasi-characters," and "quasi-events." These are all brought together through emplotment, which configures acts, incidents, and temporal succession into a unified whole. Emplotment involves the imagination, by which the reader uses the references of history to reconstruct and understand the past.¹²⁴ This brings us to the most crucial feature of history for our present concern: the historical narrative invites us to think about possibilities, to imagine how things could have been in contrast to how they are. In following the configuration of history, the reader begins to think about the other ways the past could have gone, how it would be now if certain aspects had been different—illuminated by her understanding of why things are, the reader sees how things could have been. Ricoeur argues that "*there is only a history of the potentialities of the present*. History, in this sense, explores the field of 'imaginative' variations which surround the present and the real that we take for granted in everyday life."¹²⁵ So in reading history we can perform similar thought experiments through the narrative imagination. In reading historical accounts of environmental injustice, for example, we might consider how things could have been handled differently, how the incidents that affected environmental and human health could have been avoided. This also might cause us to think further about how things are similar and different today, causing us to further consider environmental justice here

¹²³ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*.

¹²⁴ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:229-230; *From Text to Action*, 5-7.

¹²⁵ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 295, original emphasis.

and now. Environmental history, by showing us how things were, also draws us into thinking about how things could have been and to critically think about how they are now. Simply put, we learn lessons from the successes and failures of the past.

Applying the narrative imagination to the environment, then, we see how emplotment plays a key role in environmental understanding. Environmental values are often conveyed through narratives, whether it be a fictional story, environmental history, or a nature essay. It is the configuring act of the narrative imagination that allows the reader to see that a work of eco-fiction is really about our world, or that causes her to see the role of humans in a history of the decaying landscape. Environmental values are often given subtly in narrative, and the imagination is what connects this to narrative understanding of our own world. Remember that narrative understanding is more like wisdom or practical judgment, rather than technical knowledge. In relation to the natural world, narrative understanding is not scientific knowledge about ecological cause-and-effect, but judgments about values and the natural world. Scientific awareness of humanity's negative environmental impacts has not always succeeded in changing values or actions. The narrative imagination provides an alternative, causing an individual to arrive at new environmental values through her own completion of the story.¹²⁶

Overall what this means is that the narrative imagination explains part of how we have changes in environmental awareness and values over time—however, there are two sides to this point. The changes in understanding caused by the narrative imagination do not, of course, have any kind of objective end they move towards. Such changes in understanding could always move away from valuing the environment, or view human-nature relationship in new ways that

¹²⁶ Treanor similarly argues for narrative as an alternative to science, arguing that facts are necessary for good moral judgment, but that facts alone have no normative force, *Emplotting Virtue*, 179-181.

actually foster less ecological responsibility. This might be difficult to see in practice, since views in our society have generally been moving towards more environmental concern and more responsibility for the natural world. Nonetheless, narratives could always be seen to have deeper meanings that make the reader care less about the environment or be less concerned about the shared resources provided by nature.

The most important aspect of the narrative imagination for environmental concern is how it relates not only to identity and action, but particularly to the relationship between the two. Taking these in turn, we first see how the narrative imagination is crucial to having environmental identity. The productive power of the imagination is what allows me to see my life *as* a life story with a related past, present, and future that are unified and related to environmental concern. People who shared environmental experiences or values with me, the natural and unnatural places I've lived and explored, the events that shaped my view of the natural world, and my own memories and projects of environmental values and actions are all unified as a whole through the narrative imagination. Further, the narrative imagination allows me to perform ethical thought experiments regarding environmental values and identity. Through the narrative encounter with the natural world I am able to imagine myself in a similar situation and ask the related questions of 'what would I have done in that situation?' and 'what kind of person do I want to be?' in relation to the environment. I project myself in the place of a character who caused or prevented environmental harm, and in imagining how I would have responded to that fictional or historical ecological incident, I also question my environmental values and my identity as an ecological citizen.

The narrative imagination similarly relates to action. As mentioned above, the questions of what act I would do and what kind of person I am are related. The power of the imagination in

narrative allows me to not just understand the story, but to judge what kinds of actions are ecologically good or bad, allowing me to make real judgments about environmental ethics. When considering narrative acts that help or harm the natural world, I imagine my own potential actions in that position, and in doing so make judgments about what kind of practices are environmentally helpful or harmful. Through these thought experiments I make connections between lived human action and actual environmental fortune or misfortune.¹²⁷ I learn to see certain actions, or kinds of actions, as being ecologically good or bad—and I then apply this to the actions of myself and others in the world. The narrative environmental imagination gives us the capability to refigure our understanding of the connection between action and well-being, allowing us to connect our own environmental actions to the ecological well-being of ourselves, human and nonhuman others, and biotic communities in our lived world.

To fully think about the relationship between narrative imagination and environmental action, I want to return to Ricoeur's claim that "without imagination, there is no action."¹²⁸ This has a large implication for considering environmental ethics and environmentalism. The narrative imagination is not merely a possible way to change environmental action. Rather, any attempt to change the environmental actions of others will need to engage the imagination. As I discussed in the previous section, this aligns with the arguments of others (particularly radical ecologists and other environmental hermeneutic thinkers) that shifts in environmental awareness are more effective than merely fact-based, logical arguments. Reviewing this under the narrative environmental imagination gives a little more of a clear path as to how to do this; we change

¹²⁷ Environmental fortune and misfortunate here mean, at the least, the well-being of the natural environment as it relates to human fortune or misfortune. It could potentially also mean the direct fortune or misfortune of nonhuman others or the natural world, depending on the narrative understanding of the particular individual.

¹²⁸ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 177.

environmental awareness through narratives.¹²⁹ This is also why it is so important to remember that narrative includes both history and fiction, and that while they function in slightly different ways they both still engage the imagination and similar forms of narrative understanding.¹³⁰ We should consider both natural history and environmental fiction as important ways to raise ecological consciousness and influence changes in environmental action.

I examined identity and action in turn to highlight certain features of each, but under the narrative imagination they are very much interrelated. The narrative understanding links identity to action through our motivations and objectives. According to Ricoeur, stories help us to both "stabilize the real beginnings formed by the initiatives (in the strong sense of the term) we take," and further to "fix the outline of these provisional ends."¹³¹ Our more significant actions are not just physical acts, but are bound up with meaning through our memories, goals, and dreams— aspects of our identity. Likewise, the imaginative thought experiments are not really about my identity or my actions, but about the two as co-constitutive elements. To look at this in environmental terms, considering what act I would have taken in a certain situation is also considering what environmental impacts it would have, which is evaluated against my goals regarding the natural world. These goals are wrapped up in my motivation for action and the question of what kind of ecological citizen I want to be. The questions 'What would I have done?', 'what do I want to happen?', and 'who do I want to be?' are all bound up with each other. To imagine myself taking different environmental actions than a character in a narrative is

¹²⁹ Treanor makes a similar argument, though much more filled out, in his theory on narrative environmental virtue ethics. He gives several particular examples, and further gives extra attention to considering both how narrative motivate action and how they transmit moral values. Treanor, *Emplotting Virtue*, 161-169.

¹³⁰ I have previously written on a similar point under a combination of hermeneutics/narrative and deep ecology. In particular I considered nature writing and fictional stories can affect identity, which is more effective than moral rules for changing environmental action. Bell, *The Green Horizon*, 79-91.

¹³¹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 162.

also to suggest that I am a different kind of person, prompting me to ask who I am in my lived world. Environmental identity, action, and imagination, to the extent that my understanding of the first two is always at play, are firmly bound up with each other under narrative.

An important point to elaborate on regards the ethical dimension that Ricoeur explicitly adds to the narrative imagination. As mentioned above, he argues that one's imaginative evaluations in front of the text are also explorations in normative judgment, considerations of what one considers to be good and evil. Applying this to the environment, my imaginative confrontation with environmental identity and action likewise includes distinctly moral questions. When I consider what kind of person I am and what I would have done in a particular environmental scenario, I am further considering what kinds of ecological acts are good or bad, and what it means to be a good person or live a good life in relation to environmental concerns or the natural world. This is much more than a question of whether I *want* to care about the environment or *approve* of ecologically good acts; it comes down to whether I judge some kind of environmental concern to be a necessary part of being a good person and judge certain ecologically destructive acts to be morally wrong. These judgments, again, begin in narratives and carry over into my lived moral world. My considerations of environmental action and the ecological good life occur through the imagination in histories and fictions, and then refigure my moral understanding of my self, my actions, and the world around me.

The addition of ethics by Ricoeur allows us to take another step in the narrative imagination, taking the sense of moral agency into a concept of ecological moral agency.¹³² Between identity and action I develop a sense of my own environmental responsibility and

¹³² By "ecological moral agency" I essentially just mean Ricoeur's concept of moral agency as it applies specifically to environmental concern. I am using ecological instead of environmental here to avoid similarity with the names of regulatory agencies like the US Environmental Protection Agency or the UK Environmental Agency.

capabilities. The narrative environmental imagination opens me to different ways of being, which relates to my ethical sense of self. For different ways of being, we might consider different ideas of ecological citizenship or the environmental good life, or just generally different ways for me to meaningfully and ethically exist in relation to the natural world. My consideration of different ways of ecological being confronts the real environmental expectations put on me by the world, and it is these expectations that force me to answer that question—who I am in regard to environmental consideration? This claim, for Ricoeur, finds its answer between affirmation and doubt about my capabilities. The answer of my environmental self finds its answer between my affirmations (I am capable of doing better!) and doubts (what can I do?), granting me a kind of ecological moral agency, which ultimately means a set of responsibilities.

This notion of ecological moral agency raises two unique problems. First, when Ricoeur suggests that (narrative) moral agency arises in response to others, he presumably means human others. Other people hold us accountable, praise our good acts, and blame us for wrongdoing. When we consider a kind of environmental agency, however, this raises a question about which others can put these expectations on me. My particular concern is whether nonhuman others, such as animals or biotic communities, can put the kind of expectations on me that push me to consider who I am and affirm my capabilities. My initial response to this question is that it is going to come down to an interpretation by myself of the other. Moral agency comes as a response to the felt or perceived, which is to say the interpreted, expectations by others—it is my understanding of that expectation that prompts my response. Likewise, some people may respond to perceived expectations by nonhuman others or the natural world, while others will not. This involves an interplay between one's interpretation of the self and of others. Whether or not I interpret nonhuman others as putting moral expectations on me is bound up with my identity as

well as my interpretation of environmental others.¹³³ This is only a preliminary attempt at an answer, but it is important to acknowledge this question in my attempt at applying Ricoeur's notion of moral agency to the environment.

The second unique problem raised by ecological moral agency is the special place of doubt in relation to environmental problems. While self-doubt is always a part of moral agency for Ricoeur, this potentially has different dimensions with environmental concern. People often think of ecological problems in global terms, and of their own environmental capabilities in individual terms. This may not be factually accurate, as ecological problems and solutions both come from the aggregate actions of billions. Nonetheless, under narrative understanding it is easy to see my environmental capabilities as tiny compared to the grand scale of ecological problems. The triumphant claim Ricoeur gives to the self, "Here is where I stand," goes up against the imagined roar of global environmental harm. I do not mean to deny the power or capability of moral agency in relation to ecological concern, but to acknowledge an issue in environmental responsibility that the concept of the imagination helps illuminate.

We see then that the narrative imagination is an essential part of environmental identity and action. The imaginative thought experiments we engage in through narratives allow us to put ourselves in different scenarios, evaluating our ecological self and acts in relation to each other. This, in turn, allows us to understand our environmental identities and ecological actions in the lived world in new ways, including the relationship between identity and action through motives and goals. Further, there is a distinctly ethical dimension to this, as the imagination allows us to reconsider ecological good and bad and develop our own sense of ecological moral agency.

¹³³ I address a similar question, and give a similar response, in a previous work. In particular I questioned whether Ricoeur's notion of solicitude applies to animals, and likewise tied to the answer to the moral agent's interpretation of self and other; Bell, "Environmental Hermeneutics with and for Others," 148-152.

Through this one might begin to view the reality and significance of environmental harms and, more importantly, see the ways in which her own choices and actions contribute to those harms.

This is all, however, just from the consideration of the self, how the imagination relates to an individual's own identity and action. To fully understand the implications for environmental philosophy, we must further look at the narrative imagination as it relates to both communal narratives and to the political sphere through the social imaginary.

Environmental Values and the Social Imaginary

Before turning to Ricoeur's distinct notion of the social imagination, I want to consider in a more general sense the way that the narrative imagination applies at a communal level. I discussed in the first chapter how we have the interweaving of narratives between oneself and others, and how this further relates to larger community, cultural, or societal narrative identities. These communal and social narratives are largely framed by the shared myths and collective histories that exist within groups. This is to say that the very narratives by which the imagination functions include narratives shaped by and shared with others in societies and communities. The narrative imagination relates to both my own individual understanding of self and action, as well as the communal stories, identities, and morals in which I engage along with others in creating shared ideas of group identity and values. To consider this further we might consider how the narrative imagination relates to tradition and innovation.

As communities and cultures, we pass information on to others through the shared ideas and narratives we pass on, or in other words through tradition.¹³⁴ Even as we pass ideas down or receive them from others, however, we also reinterpret and modify that information, creating

¹³⁴ To be clear, the ideas of tradition and innovation do not apply only to shared communal or culture views, but I do think they are the most useful in this area.

new meanings or innovation. With the narrative imagination we see the unification of tradition and innovation, the passing on of old rules and meanings that is always undergoing interpretation, and thus, revision.¹³⁵ We can readily see how this relates to changes in environmental awareness over time; as an individual learns cultural and societal narratives regarding the environment (tradition), she is able to question those views, and arrive at new understandings of or judgments about the natural world or ecological values (innovation). Even as environmental narratives, values, and norms are passed on to others, they are constantly being changed as we use the imagination to apply stories and histories to our current communal views of our relationship to the natural world. Individual, communal, and cultural views of the environment have been changing relatively rapidly, and it is because of the narrative imagination that individuals in new generations can review the story that is told about nature and arrive at new understandings.

It is important to note when we discuss passing on values and norms through communities or cultures that this can occur in anything that is seen as conveying the values of a particular community or group. Oral and written histories certainly constitute narratives by which I receive values from my community or culture, which today includes audio and visual recordings. Even things that may not fully constitute a narrative in themselves, such as images or audio of old ads or news clips, might still contribute to my narrative understanding of a community or society, including my interpretation of their views and values.

To consider tradition and innovation further we might borrow Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of a living tradition. MacIntyre modifies virtue ethics by bringing in narrative, tying our judgment of appropriate virtue simultaneously to narrative and to community. Regarding the key

¹³⁵ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 163-164; Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 25; *Time and Narrative*, 1:68-69.

point I want to bring in, MacIntyre argues that the most important virtue is a sense of living tradition; a recognition of the need to continuously evaluate, or re-interpret, our received notions of virtue and the good life and to revise these notions when needed.¹³⁶ Applying this to ecological concerns, a sense of living environmental tradition would help us, as communities, see the need to always re-evaluate our passed-down notions of value and action as they relate to the natural environment and the biotic community. In turn, the narrative imagination is what gives us the capacity to evaluate the received ideas about the environment, or to put it another way what allows us to have innovation in regard to ecological values.

Further, recall Ricoeur's assertion that the narrative imagination involves judgments of good and evil; our innovations through the imagination are not just about what we like or want as a community, but whether and to what extent ecological concern is part of what it means to be a good community. Questioning and reinterpreting the values of our community may move us from indifference to care regarding the natural world, or to begin to see the relevance of a particular practice for environmental concern. It may involve seeing in a new way the connection between local ecological health and the well-being of others in our community. If we accept the idea of living tradition as part of positive existence as communities and cultures, then we are more open to the new views of values and action given to us through the imagination—including communal or cultural ideas about environmental value and ecological impact. This could include furthering conflicts in environmental interpretation as well. Considering changes in communal or cultural values may create tensions between the members of a community who are hanging on to older views and those expressing new views, or tension between groups who see new shared values in different ways. To most fully and directly consider how shared narratives relate to

¹³⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 221-223.

environmental concern, we should turn to Ricoeur's particular concept of the social imagination.

The social imaginary exists as a form of imagination that both maintains and transforms social bonds. This form of the imagination exists between the poles of ideology and utopia. Ideology, which relates to the past, is the imagination's power to structure ideas in order to create the kind of shared symbols and codes that allow us to have society. In its most productive forms ideology gives us positive group identity, through the shared meanings and social organization by which we exist as collectives. At its worst ideology exists as domination, when it becomes too resistant to the kinds of transformation of meaning necessary for a just society. At the other end from ideology is utopia, related to the future, which is the imagination's power to envision shared possibilities and thus to change society over time. At its best, utopia prevents ideology from becoming stagnant, and allows us to envision possibly better forms of social organization. In its negative form, utopia constitutes a kind of escapism, an obsession with the ideal that undermines real productive change. It is important to note that neither ideology nor utopia is 'good' or 'bad' or in simple sense. Each has its positive and negative features, and the most production function comes about when ideology and utopia balance each other. The social imagination is also temporal, mediating between the past (ideology) and the future (utopia), between recollection and anticipation.¹³⁷ In the tension between ideology and utopia is the productive power of the social imagination.

Ideology and utopia are interrelated, so much so that Ricoeur claims that we can often only identify modes of thought as ideological or utopian after the fact. Ideology, due to its social nature, raises ethical questions that reveal gaps between how things could and should be; and so,

¹³⁷ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 182-185; Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 166-168; Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory*, 138-140.

ideology also produces the kind of wandering or rupture we associate with utopia. Likewise, utopia, even in its most radical forms, always aims at group stability that new modes of social organization could provide; utopia also looks for the integration we expect of ideology. This tension is essential—according to Ricoeur it is only between ideology and utopia that we can take control of the social imagination, allowing us to have both the stability and growth of a well-functioning society.¹³⁸ The difficult question is whether and how we can steer the social imagination towards the more productive forms of ideology and utopia, and away from their distorting modes. Kaplan, in his elaboration of a Ricoeurian critical social theory, provides a helpful clarification here. The social imagination can avoid being a vicious circle and instead be a productive upward spiral when we pair it with practical reason, “judging what is best to do in particular situations.” Further, this pairing of social imagination with practical judgment is the best we can do—in keeping with the hermeneutic worldview, there is no outside view from which we can judge societies, only the endless task of critical interpretation.¹³⁹ The question to which we now turn is what the social imagination can illuminate about environmental interpretation and concern.

The idea of the social imaginary is helpful in critiquing certain trends in environmental thought. First, we have various forms of environmental ideology. Among the shared meanings and social structures through which we have group identity are shared ideas that relate, and relate us, to the natural environment. From local communities to international agreements, we see roughly shared ideas of environmental protection as being necessary for overall human good. In practice this can be seen in examples ranging from local campus sustainability initiatives, to state

¹³⁸ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 186-187.

¹³⁹ Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory*, 140.

and federal environmental regulations, to international climate agreements. Climate agreements, ranging from the Kyoto Protocol to the more recent Paris Accord, are a good example of a positive form of environmental ideology. Such agreements are the result of social-political bonds based on shared ideas of human well-being in relation to the natural world. These shared ideas included enough of a unified concept of human environmental good, as well as agreements on practical aims, to result in social-political bonds regarding climate action.¹⁴⁰ These shared ideas and bonds are a function of the social imagination, as it relates to the human capacity to envision mutual human goods and futures. Most critically it involves shared ideas on who we are, as a society and as co-existing societies, particularly as this involves ideas about the biosphere as relevant to future human existence and flourishing.

Environmental ideology also has its negative forms, various kind of ecological domination. As an example of an ideology that relates negatively to the environment, we might consider the dominant Western view associating success and well-being with material goods and comforts. As social ecologist Murray Bookchin has noted, social organization in the Western world holds as a central tenant the notion that economic growth is the most important good; this view significantly contributes to environmental degradation by escalating both resource use and pollution to achieve material and monetary growth.¹⁴¹ I would add that this notion of growth as an end fits Ricoeur's notion of a distorting ideology because it is largely resistant to transformation. An example of the sedimentation of the growth ideology can be seen in the proposed "Green New Deal," which attempts to intermingle financial and environmental

¹⁴⁰ Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, "History of UN Climate Talks," <https://www.c2es.org/content/history-of-un-climate-talks/>, retrieved July 17, 2019.

¹⁴¹ Bookchin, "What is Social Ecology", in *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*, ed. David R. Keller (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 272-274.

stability.¹⁴² This fits with the modernization narrative that more development is the necessary path to improved lives; the only way to achieve sustainability is through the right kind of development.¹⁴³ Another example of the negative aspects of ideology can be found in mainstream environmentalism itself. While it does give some amount of consideration to the natural world, mainstream environmentalism has been criticized as aiming at shallow notions of human good that focus only on the well-being of privileged people in wealthy nations. Such criticisms have argued that the dominant environmentalist ideology keeps being repeated despite its exclusion of the particular environmental concerns of people of color, indigenous groups, and developing nations.¹⁴⁴ The image of environmental health as related to white affluence in the Global North is subtly repeated over and over, even as it largely ignores claims about how environmental degradation particularly harms members of marginalized groups. Environmental ideology can give us the kinds of social environmental identity necessary for real environmental organization, but in its distorted forms it can also limit positive change through ecological domination.

On the other side from ideology we have environmental utopia. Much like the productive power of the imagination discussed earlier, this is the capacity of the social imagination to

¹⁴² *Recognizing the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal*, House Resolution 109, 116th Congress 1st Session, <https://ocasio-cortez.house.gov/sites/ocasio-cortez.house.gov/files/Resolution%20on%20a%20Green%20New%20Deal.pdf>, retrieved September 18, 2020.

The Green New Deal does not rely exclusively on economic growth for justification, it also includes human health and life; nonetheless, the resolution for its development heavily features language of material and economic goods.

¹⁴³ To clarify, I am not arguing that this makes the Green New Deal itself necessarily bad; but it is an example of the persistence of economic growth in our societal conception of the good.

¹⁴⁴ Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements: A Summary," in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism*, ed. George Sessions (Boston, Shambhala, 1995), 151-155; Robert Figueroa and Claudia Mills, "Environmental Justice," in *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Dale Jamieson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 426-428; Robert Melchior Figueroa, "Evaluating Environmental Justice Claims," in *Forging Environmentalism: Justice, Livelihood, and Contested Environments*, ed. Joanne Bauer (New York: M.E. Sharp, 2006), 363.

produce new ideas about how society could be—including the ways that societies view and affect the natural environment. This gives us the power to challenge our current environmental values and policies, and to imagine revising our social bonds in the way those bonds relate to concern for natural resources and environmental impact. This also allows us to envision new group environmental identities against our current ones. In its best form, environmental utopia gives us the opening for positive social changes. The environmental justice movement provides a good example here. This movement imagines transformations in environmentalism and social organization such that marginalized groups receive equal consideration. This means not just equal protection from toxic waste, but also equal political recognition, space for grassroots organization, and full consideration of their environmental identities and heritages.¹⁴⁵ The concept of environmental utopia applies to various perspectives that envision needed transformations in ecological awareness, including those that challenge mainstream environmentalism.

On the other hand, in its worst form environmental utopia becomes a delusion that is so disconnected from reality it undermines or displaces the possibilities for real ecological change. As one example of this, we might consider climate denial. Certain groups believe that environmental problems generally, and climate change specifically, are false narratives used to support certain agendas. This is an extreme form of distorted experience, a vision of a world where ecological concerns simply do not exist, against all evidence to the contrary. Such a view envisions a society that fully accepts this denial of ecological problems. This utopian perspective shuts out any possibility for real environmental change, because it is fixated on a world where such problems simply do not exist. As another example of a negative form of environmental

¹⁴⁵ Figueroa, “Evaluating Environmental Justice Claims,” 363-375.

utopia, we might consider extreme forms of techno-optimism. This is the view that new technological breakthroughs will allow us to achieve a kind of ecological harmony without the need for significant changes in individual lifestyle, comfort, or convenience. Through new scientific advances, according to this perspective, everything we enjoy now that harms the natural world will exist as an ecologically-non-harmful alternative in the future. We will have all of the benefits of technology with none of the environmental costs. Again, this unrealistic vision of a perfect future undermines real environmental change, in this case by undermining the need for ecological responsibility. It is the delusion of the perfect world in which, without a single loss of comfort or convenience, we live harmoniously with the natural world. As the opposite pole to ideology, utopia gives us the space for new meaning necessary for positive environmental change but can also provide the kind of false idealizations that disrupt the possibility of turning new environmental understanding into practical acts.

We can see then how the imaginary practices of ideology and utopia relate to environmental considerations, in both the positive and negative side of each. The question that remains is what can be said about a positive social environmental imagination.¹⁴⁶ Again, Ricoeur argues that the work of the imagination exists between the two sides of distorted experience. The productive social imagination has to maintain a balance between the frozen ideology of what is and the displaced utopian fantasy of what could be.¹⁴⁷ One the side of ideology, shared meanings and self-images regarding the natural world allow us to maintain collective environmental identities, but we have to be wary that these do not become the kind of stagnant enforced ideas

¹⁴⁶ Brian Treanor has given an insightful look at this as well, though our approaches differ in our particular considerations. His examination of this problem is framed to fit into his larger project of a narrative environmental virtue ethic. "Turn Around and Step Forward: Ideology and Utopia in the Environmental Movement," *Environmental Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2010), 33-44.

¹⁴⁷ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 187.

that form dogma. On the side of utopia, our shared capability to envision new possibilities can transform the environmental aspects of our social relationships in positive ways, but we have to make sure these new possibilities are practical and realistic. This difficult middle ground would allow us to maintain social bonds and collective identities around shared ecological concern, while also being critically reflective of our environmental views, practices, and aims.

There is no clear, concrete answer for how to maintain the most productive functions of the social environmental imagination; after all, it is something that will always vary and always be at work. However, there are a few things to consider that are potentially helpful here. First, remember that social imagination is temporal, mediating between the past and present, between recollection and anticipation.¹⁴⁸ The negative functions of the social imagination happen when we become locked in the recollection of past traditions (ideological stagnation) or lost in the anticipation of future freedom (utopian escapism). The productive social imagination works best when connected to both past and the future, aware of our ecological tradition and identity but also looking toward the innovation of new environmental values and actions. Further, as mentioned above Kaplan argues that the social imagination can be a productive upward spiral when we utilize practical reason, and that “all we can do is interpret, judge, and act in the most appropriate and just way we can.”¹⁴⁹ There is no method to utilizing the social imagination, but we do our best when we try to be open, reasonable, and fair. In the particular case of ecological concern, I would argue, we should utilize the expertise of environmental scientists in our interpretations and judgment—in both ideology and utopia we should base our shared ideas about the natural world partially on the best scientific understanding of the environmental

¹⁴⁸ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 168; Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory*, 140. I am borrowing phrasing from both in my description of the temporal element of the social imagination.

¹⁴⁹ Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory*, 140.

available to us. Here as well, however, we have to be careful that science is balanced with values and understood as a method of knowledge, otherwise the misuse of science could become another form of environmental domination. Further, in ecological consideration we try to balance our material needs with our reliance on nature and consider how environmental impacts affect the health and livelihood of various groups.¹⁵⁰ The social environmental imagination, with the related ideas of ideology and utopia, is useful for thinking about our shared understanding of environmental values and practices. And still, like the other aspects of a hermeneutic environmental philosophy, this will always involve both capability and conflict.

Imagination in Capability and Conflict

As we did with identity and action, we conclude our look at the imagination by considering the implication for environmental capability and conflict. For identity and action, the point is that we have the capability for changes in self-understanding and action, or for being better and doing better. For the imagination this is a little different; it is not that we have the capability for improving our imagination, but rather the imagination itself is the source of our environmental capabilities. The hermeneutic imagination is what gives us our distinctly human capabilities in terms of self-understanding and action. Any capabilities that we have for changes in environmental identity and actions exist because of the environmental imagination. This applies to our ongoing theme of conflict as well. The imagination's productive power can essentially create new, deeper, or different conflicts. Because the imagination gives us the capability for understanding our ecological selves and actions differently than it did before, it also gives us the capability for understanding differently from each other, including in ways that

¹⁵⁰ In keeping with his focus on environmental virtue ethics, Treanor's approach frames the solution in terms of multiple narratives and human flourishing. Treanor, "Turn Around and Step Forward," 40-44.

cause environmental disagreements. The imagination, then, gives rise to conflicting ideas of value, identity, and action—including as we understand them in relation to the natural world.

The narrative environmental imagination likewise gives individuals the capability for new values, identities, and actions in relation to nature; this again opens us to new ecological conflicts. On the side of capability, the narrative imagination in particular highlights two related things here. First, this shows more fully how we imagine ourselves differently through narratives (both fictional and historical) and how this relates to our ability to question and conceive of different possibilities for our character and actions. Secondly, the narrative imagination better shows the full complexity of refiguring identity and action, including the ethical dimension and the self-interpretation of moral or environmental agency. On the other hand, the narrative imagination also reaffirms the severity of the conflict of interpretations for the environment. First, insofar as we already interpret fictions and histories differently, we further will have different reactions to them when applying our own character and actions to these stories through the imagination. Second, once we see all the related aspects of the imagination (identity, action, and ethics), it further highlights how these can lead to conflicting views and values. To be clear, the idea that the imagination leads us to different understandings from each other is not in and of itself a bad thing. Asserting that we have different interpretations and acknowledging it is descriptively right. This does however highlight a tension between (normative) environmentalism and (descriptive) hermeneutic environmental philosophy—this tension is focus of the next chapter.

Last of all, I want to briefly consider the special case of this as it applies to the social imagination. The capability aspect here is fairly straightforward: the social imagination allows us to maintain collective identities and social ties around our shared environmental concerns, but

further to do so in ways that is open to change. This allows us to incorporate environmental values and concerns into our social identities, norms, and policies—particularly in new ways or to greater extents. This also allows us to adjust our social values as ecological knowledge and concern increase or change. To consider the other side of this, the conflict I want to point out here does not come from the distorting forms ideology or utopia. Rather, conflict here happens in the sense that even in its most beneficial functioning the social imagination may produce differing ideas about environmental values and the natural world. Our shared identities and social bonds are rarely in absolute agreement, and the social imagination can produce differing ideas within or between groups about how environmental values relate to their overall identity, values, and shared ideas of appropriate action.

The divergent bonds and values produced by the social environmental imagination can give us communal and social environmental disagreements. This leads to both moral and political arguments about ecological values, as well as disagreements about the practical means and ends regarding our treatment of the natural world. It is important to emphasize that environmental conflict at this level, again, comes from the productive functioning of the social imagination; the distorting forms of ideology and utopia area a separate issue. The capability for new environmental understanding itself contributes to the conflict of environmental interpretation.

So far, I have used a frame of hermeneutics and narrative theory to outline identity, action, and the imagination as they relate to environmental interpretation and understanding. Along the way, I have related this to the problem of environmental capability and conflict. Hermeneutic and narrative understanding of the natural world gives shows us our capability for new environmental value and understanding—particularly as this relates to our values, identities,

and actions, all of which are mediated by the imagination. However, at the very same time this produces conflicting understandings of the environment and its value, which no readily apparent way to resolve them. I turn now to consider more directly the implications of this for the intersection of hermeneutic philosophy environmental ethics.

CHAPTER 5

TRUTH, TRANSLATION, AND ENVIRONMENTAL VALUE

As this chapter marks a turning point in the analysis, I want to briefly recap the work so far. Through the past several chapters I have outlined what I am calling a hermeneutic environmental philosophy. This has been a mostly descriptive philosophical claim about how we interpret the environment, based primarily on the hermeneutic and narrative philosophy of Ricoeur. Identity, action, and the imagination are the primary dimensions of environmental interpretation. Identity relates to all other interpretations, meaningful action is how interpretation relates practically to the world, and the imagination is the mediating function by which new meanings occur. As I have examined identity, action, and the imagination through both hermeneutics and narrative I have attempted to emphasize how all three relate both to human capability and the conflict of interpretations. Understanding environmental values as interpretations helps to emphasize both how we have the capability for new environmental views and values, but also how we inevitably arrive at conflicting environmental interpretations. The question I want to turn to now is to address what we can possibly say about better or worse understandings of the environment, particularly as this relates to value.

I want to approach this question through several considerations. First, I want to consider a hermeneutic conception of truth and examine how this relates to competing claims about the environment; I also discuss how this highlights an issue in other works on environmental hermeneutics. Secondly, I want to address the hermeneutic relevance of approaching environmental values through expanded human-interest; considering different ways the natural world benefits people is commensurable with being open to multiple interpretations about the environment. My third consideration is to take a hermeneutic model of translation, which we can

see in the work of both Gadamer and Ricoeur and apply to how we understand and value non-human living things. This approach is particularly helpful in considering the limits and difficulties of understanding that which is foreign or strange to us, in this case the limits of understanding nonhuman others. Last of all, I briefly consider the possibilities and limits raised in this chapter.

Hermeneutic Truth and Environmental Ethics

In the preceding chapters I repeatedly touched on, without fully confronting, the difficult question of which environmental views are better interpretations and which are worse. To put it a more forceful way, which environmental interpretations are potentially better or worse, and which are most likely invalid? To approach these related questions, I want to get as clear as possible on the somewhat murky idea of truth in hermeneutics. Truth is a term that must be used with care in properly hermeneutic thinking, but it can best be located in between the poles of dogmatic objectivity and skeptical relativism. Thinkers in the tradition of Gadamer and Ricoeur firmly reject the notion of truth as the kind of universal, objective knowledge that stands beyond the time or situation of the person comprehending it. As such, human understanding cannot be seen as the march towards better, greater knowledge. As Gadamer famously put it: “Understanding is not, in fact, understanding better [...] It is enough to say that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all.*”¹⁵¹ Hermeneutic thinkers argue that we should be open to new interpretations and thus to new understandings, but this does not mean we will have a greater hold on truth.

While hermeneutics is resistant to certain notions of universal truth, it also rejects the

¹⁵¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 296, original emphasis.

kind of open relativism on the other side. As Ricoeur puts it, “if it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is *not* true that all interpretations are equal and may be assimilated to so-called rules of thumb. The text is a *limited* field of *possible* constructions. The logic of validation allows us to move between the two limits of dogmatism and skepticism.”¹⁵² Hermeneutic thought places interpretation and understanding in-between our usual notions of absolute truth and pure relativism.¹⁵³ Any attempt at a hermeneutic environmental ethic must do likewise. To do so I first elaborate on Gadamer’s notion of truth as an event in relation to application and dialogue. While my analysis has been primarily Ricoeurian thus far, certain concepts from Gadamer are a helpful addition as we move into normative terrain. Returning to Ricoeur, I revisit his notions of explanation and understanding, which I discussed in Chapter 2. Between Gadamer and Ricoeur we find a rough guide to see what kind of truth claims, in relation to normative claims, environmental hermeneutics can and cannot make.

For Gadamer truth is an event, which means that truth is an occurrence where I understand something in a new way. To have genuine understanding I must be open to the meaning of the text. I cannot interpret the text having already decided what it says, I must be prepared for the text to tell me something that I do not already know. Part of this is recognizing my own pre-judgments. I cannot eliminate my pre-judgments, but I can be aware of them so that they do not distort my interpretation of the text. Truth, then, comes down to being genuinely open to the meaning of the text—especially to meanings that go against what I already believe.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 160, emphasis added.

¹⁵³ Paralleling Ricoeur, Caputo sums up this balance between truth and relativism: “Even our firmest truths are matters of interpretation, but that does not mean anything goes. *Some interpretations are better than others.*” *Hermeneutics*, 13, original emphasis.

¹⁵⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 271-272.

This openness allows for a genuine dialogue, a back-and-forth between the historical situation of the text and the historical situation of the reader. The conversation is driven by the questions of my time and situation, and the answers are understood by me in a way relevant to my own historical context. A living text requires living questions. *Hermeneutic truth occurs in the application of the text's meaning to the historical situation of the reader.* Truth in this sense is not a validation of facts, but an event of new meaning. Specifically, hermeneutic truth is when, through the text, I understand aspects of my own situation and even my own self in new ways. Truth is no more or less than the disclosure of meaning about myself and my world.¹⁵⁵

One last thing to add to the Gadamer-Ricoeur model of hermeneutic truth is the specifically Ricoeurian notion of explanation and understanding. Understanding is the result of interpretation, our meaningful comprehension of something. Explanation refers to various explanatory models, which can help give us reasons why one interpretation is more likely than another. The dialectic of explanation and understanding can help us differentiate potentially valid interpretations from those that are shallow and dubious. When dealing with fiction, for example, literary theory provides explanations that help us validate some interpretations as more likely.¹⁵⁶ For another example, the environmental sciences can provide explanations against which we see some interpretations of the natural world as more likely to be valid than others.¹⁵⁷ Explanatory theories help us decide between better and worse interpretations. However, explanation rarely shows us that one interpretation is true or right over others. Explanation helps us reduce the field of potentially valid interpretations, but it does not give us one objective understanding.

¹⁵⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 366-370; Caputo, *Hermeneutics*, 102-107.

¹⁵⁶ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, pg. 78.

¹⁵⁷ Again, Caputo likewise uses the example of climate science and climate change, though he does not explicitly label this as explanation and understanding; *Hermeneutics*, pg. 13.

Truth as an event requires openness to the meaning of the text and occurs in the application of that meaning to the history and situation of the reader. Further, explanation can help differentiate between better and worse interpretations, which likewise is helpful in reaching truth through interpretation. The significance of this is that it means multiple possible, conflicting truths. If people are genuinely open to new meaning, they will interpret the text in different ways. Further, they will understand the meaning of the text differently as they apply it to different historical situations. And while explanation can show some understandings to be invalid, it will leave us with multiple understandings that are equally good but contradictory to each other. This means we have the possibility for multiple understandings that are equally valid, and without a way to privilege one over the others, we have to accept that there are always multiple truths. Hermeneutics leaves us with conflicting interpretations that are equally true.

The question I have constantly touched on in the preceding chapters is whether a genuinely hermeneutic approach to environmental value can necessarily privilege environmentally positive interpretations over environmentally negative ones.¹⁵⁸ Approaches in environmental hermeneutics have generally focused on the positive side of interpretation, which is the opening of understanding and ethics towards greater inclusion of nature. A primary consideration in hermeneutics is to let the text speak to us, which applied to environmental thought has focused on allowing nature to speak. Against a backdrop of industrialization and reductive-mechanistic views of the natural world, being open to new meaning can be seen as being open to the value of nature. Worse interpretation occurs when I hold old meanings, perhaps instrumental views of the environment, over other possible meanings. But, if I am open

¹⁵⁸ Remember that my use of environmentally negative interpretation does not necessarily mean interpretations that view the natural world as bad in some way; it mostly means interpretations that do not see significance or value in the natural world.

to the meaning disclosed by nonhuman others or the natural world, I likewise am open to new interpretations—perhaps about the value of nature. And so environmental hermeneutics opens us to new environmental values. Hand-in-hand with this are a new ecological self-understanding, and a new interpretation of nature.

I do not intend to challenge the idea that environmental interpretation *can* lead to greater concern for nature; indeed, one of my primary arguments so far has been exactly this. What interests me here, however, is the other side of this: what about interpretations and understandings of the natural world that view the environment primarily as a resource for human use? What if being open to the meaning of the natural world shows that its value is primarily bound up in human well-being? Which views or positions towards the environment can and cannot be deemed acceptable through a hermeneutic approach to environmental ethics? To further consider the difficulty behind these questions I want to first engage with some of the work from my fellow environmental hermeneuticists.

One of the most engaging approaches to a hermeneutic environmental ethic is Treanor's narrative environmental virtue ethics. Treanor provides a solid argument for the value of narrative virtue ethics in relation to environmental concern. Virtue ethics is a better approach for environmental issues, he argues, since virtue is both more firmly grounded and better able to go beyond moral rules. Further, facts and logical arguments alone are insufficient to change beliefs and behaviors regarding the natural environment. Narratives, on the other hand, can help change both beliefs and behaviors, and can help environmental virtue ethics consider the problems of understanding and motivation. Narrative and virtue ethics are a natural fit through shared emphasis of character and practical judgment, and Treanor argues strongly that together they

form the best approach to consider the environmental crisis of the 21st Century.¹⁵⁹

A problem Treanor discusses at length is the charge of relativism. Though narrative environmental virtue ethics may at first glance seem relative, he argues, it is actually not. Though it is based on context and perspective, it still allows for better understanding, gives us contextual and revisable facts, and allows us to determine when our self or others are judging well. Nonetheless, he acknowledges this may still leave us with difficulties in resolving contradictory moral claims.¹⁶⁰ Further, Treanor argues that narratives show us why we value certain things over others, which allows us to evaluate our judgments about what should be valued. And thus, narratives help us to determine which other things should be valued or not. Despite this, he argues, we can still value things well or poorly.¹⁶¹

Treanor's main response to the overall problem of relativism is, first, that we should deliberately engage narratives with contradictory views to avoid the bias of our own prejudices.¹⁶² To ensure that I am not merely confirming the views I already hold, I should intentionally encounter, in an open and genuine way, narratives whose meaning may likely go against what I currently believe—opening myself to new meaning through the text. Second, Treanor argues we must balance narrative with other ways of knowing, such as the natural sciences and social sciences; a narrative approach alone may overlook distortions or misrepresentations, but this can be helped by supporting it with other sources of understanding. Nonetheless, Treanor argues, our judgments will never be beyond doubt.¹⁶³ I want to point out

¹⁵⁹ Treanor, *Emplotting Virtue*, 156-161, 186.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 142-144, 195.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 144, 191.

here that Treanor's response to the problem of relativism touches on both aspects of hermeneutic truth I described above—being open to new meaning and the dialectic of explanation and understanding.

The issue that I want to call attention to is that though a narrative approach does give us some means to sort out better or worse views, we may end up with competing claims that are irreconcilable and difficult to resolve. A critique of Treanor's own example is helpful in highlighting this problem. He mentions specifically considering ecocentric or biocentric narratives to counteract the prevalence of anthropocentric narratives in our culture.¹⁶⁴ The issue I see with this claim is that these are ethically incompatible positions. For example, the actions, traits, or dispositions required of me in order to stave off the worst effects of climate change for human life may be different than those required of me if I am trying to protect nonhuman living beings or the ecosystem as a whole. The environmental solutions that are best for the natural world might not be the best solutions for the human world. For example, having everyone live in condensed cities may be detrimental to human emotional health, but overall better for the biosphere. To take the opposite side, we could potentially find a balance between our current practices and climate action that results in the best possible approach for human welfare, but may still allow detrimental impacts to ecosystems, species, or wildlife. For example, while we can compare and contrast these different narratives, an anthropocentric, ecocentric, and biocentric interpretation of the world are often incompatible with each other. And here we have no clear way to decide among them. To clarify, I am not disagreeing with Treanor's claim that we ought

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 189; To briefly clarify these terms, anthropocentric refers to a human-centered ethic, where only human interests get direct consideration. Zoocentrism (discussed later) is animal-centered, giving moral consideration to all and only animals. Biocentrism, life-centered, gives direct moral consideration to all individual living things. Ecocentrism, in contrast, gives direct moral consideration to living things as biotic communities, focusing on the interest of the ecosystem as a whole over individual interests.

to consider conflicting narratives, nor am I claiming that he entirely misses the issue here. However, Treanor also subtly leans towards positive environmental interpretations, focusing on how narrative can lead towards greater ecological consideration. In contrast, deliberating between these conflicting views or narratives may lead to lesser consideration of the natural world, or particularly away from consideration of environmental others as having value for their own sake.

Another approach I want to consider is that given by Paul van Tongeren and Paulien Snellen, who focus more explicitly on the normative implications of hermeneutics for environmental ethics. Van Tongeren and Snellen offer a critique of environmental ethics based on Bernard Williams' critique of ethical theory. First, arguments about how we ought to act towards the natural world are only likely to persuade those who already share the rational presuppositions that particular argument is based on. Even if a person finds a particular argument in environmental ethics to be completely valid, it will usually not change her actions if she does not already have similar beliefs.¹⁶⁵ This is fairly similar to a point Treanor makes, which is that rational arguments alone do not really change people's actions.¹⁶⁶ The second point that van Tongeren and Snellen make, again following Williams' work, is that we should not use supposedly impartial facts as a foundation for theories about how we should treat others. This is especially problematic for environmental ethics, they argue, as it often relies on claims made by the environmental sciences regarding our treatment of the natural world. These issues show a

¹⁶⁵ Paul van Tongeren and Paulien Snellen, "How Hermeneutics Might Save the Life of (Environmental) Ethics," in *Interpreting Nature*, 299-301.

¹⁶⁶ Treanor, *Emplotting Virtue*, 180.

flaw with environmental ethics when approached as a theory. Instead, again following Williams, the authors argue we need ethical reflection.¹⁶⁷

An environmental ethic based on ethical reflection, van Tongeren and Snellen argue, should begin with the understanding that nature is always interpreted and that our normative claims about nature are likewise interpretations. This is to say that a proper environmental ethic would be aware of itself as being based on interpretation—in other words, would be hermeneutic. Such an ethic, they argue, should begin with moral experiences instead of abstractions. More traditional theories in environmental ethics should likewise be viewed as interpretations based on different experiences; none of the theories alone forms a complete answer, but each contributes something to our moral view of nature. A hermeneutic environmental ethic is therefore necessarily pluralistic, as it aims to enrich the wide range of ethical experience. The better approach to the complexity of a morality regarding nature is not to try to reduce it to one answer, but to embrace a variety of views and experiences.¹⁶⁸

While their approach is pluralistic, van Tongeren and Snellen argue that it is not relativistic. Hermeneutic environmental ethics can still be modestly normative, as they phrase it, as it has a critical stance for comparing interpretations, affirming some and denying others. This does place limits on environmental hermeneutics, however. Such an approach, according to the authors, is of limited use in addressing current issues, which may require radical change. Environmental hermeneutics may be more beneficial in addressing future environmental problems by examining the framework around current issues, which can help to further our environmental self-understanding and in turn benefit our way of life in the future. Last of all,

¹⁶⁷ Van Tongeren and Snellen, “How Hermeneutics Might Save the Life of (Environmental) Ethics,” 301-303.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 303-308.

while a hermeneutic environmental ethic must be *epistemologically* anthropocentric (from a human perspective), it can still try to understand and incorporate human experiences that view nature as intrinsically valuable.¹⁶⁹ The authors here are following more of the openness and dialogue model of hermeneutic truth.

The approach proposed by van Tongeren and Snellen likewise relates to the issue I am concerned with regarding environmental hermeneutics. Their environmental ethic is rooted in experiences and embraces plurality, while still claiming to be normative. The authors acknowledge that this does not allow us to make the kind of firm moral claims that traditional environmental ethics aims for, and yet they maintain this normative dimension in a way that implies and leans toward positive environmental values. However, what about views apathetic to environmental value that are rooted in experience? Do we have any basis for favoring experiences or reflections that value nature over experiences and reflections that reduce nature to existing for human benefit? Although Van Tongeren and Snellen argue that hermeneutics might be ill-suited for immediate practical ecological concern, their suggested scope for environmental hermeneutics does not fully avoid the issue at hand. Even when dealing with long-term issues and looking at the framework around environmental problems, I have to consider that views, values, and self-understandings that do not favor environmental value or protection are potentially just as valid as those that do. As with Treanor, the problem is not a flaw in the particular thinking of van Tongeren and Snellen, but rather a potential issue that is inherent to but underemphasized in hermeneutic approaches to environmental ethics. With these examples in mind I want to elaborate on the general issue.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 309-312. To clarify, the authors argue that we are limited to understandings from a human perspective, but this does not mean that we must be egocentric. This is oversimplified, I argue, but not entirely wrong.

The point to consider more fully is what kind of ethical claims might be derived from a hermeneutic approach to environmental philosophy. First, can hermeneutics favor certain views on environmental value over others? People often speak of environmental value as though it is a single kind of thing, but there are a lot of different reasons for and ways to value the natural world and nonhuman others. Many people view the natural environment as having value for humans only as a material resource, seeing the environment as something to provide people with either economic or material benefit. Others view the natural world as having value for humans in a variety of ways, including resources, aesthetic enjoyment, cultural relevance, and so on. And yet others view the environment as having value for its own sake, either as individual living entities or as biotic communities as a whole. These are all, at least on the face of it, equally valid views of the natural world. Considering these views as part of a pluralistic whole and focusing broadly on environmental value might be both hermeneutically best as well as the most practically effective approach. However, these views may in many cases have different ethical boundaries, as I briefly discussed above. If we want to use hermeneutics as a basis for normative claims about the environment, it is important to at least thoroughly examine whether we can adjudicate between these views.

The hermeneutic answer to this question of value would be to say that valid interpretations come when we are open to the meaning of the text, or when we refer back to experienced ethical connections with the natural world.¹⁷⁰ However, it is a difficult question as to what kind of views towards nature this favors or allows. Environmentalists and environmental academics have often argued that, if we are open to the intrinsic value of nature, then nature will show this value to us. However, this is really not so simple. Historically we have seen nature

¹⁷⁰ Again, this is the approach by Van Tongeren and Snellen; *Ibid.*, 305-307.

viewed at different times as threatening and healing, as godly and as sinful, as being alien to humanity and as being one with humanity. Basing environmental value on experience and interpretation is very complex, as many people might experience the natural world as a mere resource or as uncomfortable and threatening. Further complicating the relationship between experience and value is the fact that different environments, ecosystems, and settings are often interpreted by different persons in different ways. For example, I personally appreciate the natural world most when faced with trees and hills, and sometimes snow. In contrast, I am more apathetic when I encounter environments that are flat, dry, and arid. Experiences largely relate to preferences, and certainly relate to different prejudices, thus giving rise to a variety of environmental interpretations. To say that being open to nature will reveal its value is itself a prejudice about and interpretation of environmental value, which may not be true for others.¹⁷¹

While there is not a lot that we can firmly say about what makes an interpretation better or worse, perhaps at minimum there is an argument for understanding the environment as it affects human well-being. Going back to Ricoeur's dialectic of explanation and understanding is useful, as the environmental sciences may help us mediate between various interpretations regarding the natural world and the human nature relationship. There is ample empirical evidence that we are both reliant on and damaging to natural environments. Similarly, there is ample evidence that a clean environment is at least instrumentally valuable to our existence. In contrast, there is no evidence whatsoever that people do not need the environment or that human activity is not damaging to the biosphere.¹⁷² Empirical sciences may not settle environmental

¹⁷¹ I am using prejudice here in the hermeneutic sense of a pre-judgment.

¹⁷² To clarify here, I do not mean to suggest that people explicitly put forward the thesis that humans do not need or do not damage the environment. Certainly, no other environmental philosophers that I am aware of are arguing that nature lacks even instrumental value. Primarily I am just pointing out where a hermeneutic framing can draw a line on environmental interpretation. However, outside academia some people do act like environmental concern is unimportant, which would suggest they believe we either do not need or are not harming the environment.

debates, but they can play a role in them. However, no scientific explanation can help us differentiate between interpretations regarding what further ways the natural world may or may not have value. A hermeneutic approach to the environment can help us to think about different perspectives on nature as interpretations but is limited in terms of what it can say about which interpretations are better.

A closer look at the conflict of environmental interpretation shows a limit to how much hermeneutics can help us differentiate between better and worse interpretations of the natural world. While other thinkers have admitted to this problem, at least to the extent that hermeneutics gives us a plurality of environmental views, they have nonetheless implied that further and better interpretation will lead us toward and deeper into environmental concern. In contrast, focusing on environmental interpretation means accepting that new interpretations and new understandings may lead us away from certain kinds of ecological concern or back to more shallow considerations of the environment. There is a tension between the kind of truth hermeneutics supports and the kind of claims environmental philosophers often hope to make. With that said, I want to consider enlightened human-interest as a potential approach to hermeneutic valuation of the environment.

A Hermeneutics of Expanded Human-Interest

I'd like to briefly examine the notion of enlightened human-interest as a related philosophical position to further think about a hermeneutic environmental ethic. For a conceptual notion of broad human-interest, consider the notion of weak anthropocentrism, utilizing this term as it is defined by Bryan Norton.¹⁷³ Anthropocentrism, as it relates to normative values, affirms

¹⁷³ I am hesitant to align my own view with the term "weak anthropocentrism," which carries some negative baggage in the environmental philosophy community. That said, the position I am outlining here does roughly fit under the framework of a weak anthropocentric view.

that humans are the only true focus of direct moral consideration—in other words, nonhuman entities and the natural world do not have intrinsic value. Strong anthropocentrism focuses on narrow, uncritical human interests and generally supports—or at least does not challenge—reductive and consumptive views of the natural world. In contrast weak anthropocentrism, as defined by Norton, focuses on broad, rationally considered interests as well as the diverse experiences that contribute to human valuing of the environment. Nature is valued by *and for* humans, but this is by no means limited to economic or otherwise consumptive value. Aesthetic, recreational, cultural, and experiential values are also possibilities, or more broadly human flourishing through engagement with the natural world.¹⁷⁴

To elaborate on its hermeneutic value, this view prompts us to question how and why we value the natural world and allows us to challenge consumptive and reductive views. In other words, weak anthropocentrism accepts various views on environmental value, and further requires that we critically reflect on those values. To restate this in more hermeneutic terms, this position calls for an opening in regard to nature—an interpretation that begins with receptivity to various understandings of environmental value. Further, weak anthropocentrism as an understanding suggests that deliberating the value of nature encourages us to further critique our pre-judgments regarding the natural world, to put it again in hermeneutic terms.

It is helpful here to contrast weak anthropocentrism with other views. Strong anthropocentrism, on the one side, is fairly rigid and reductive. In emphasizing nature as a material resource, it forces certain meanings and views over other potential interpretations. Views like biocentrism and ecocentrism, on the other hand, are likewise dogmatic, forcefully

¹⁷⁴ Bryan G. Norton, “Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism,” *Environmental Ethics* 6, no. 2 (1984): 131-136.

affirming one particular view of the environmental over other potential interpretations. Further, such views have to rely on the debatable concept of the intrinsic value of nature. While some people do indeed interpret nonhuman others as having value for their own sake, many others do not. I do not mean to claim that nonhuman others cannot have intrinsic value, but intrinsic ecological value is difficult to communicate with or reach agreement with those who do not already agree. Enlightened human-interest, on the other hand, can be framed as a philosophy of openness which affirms the possibility of a variety of values that nonhuman living things might have for people, including resources, ecosystem services, aesthetic and recreational value, cultural relevance, and contributing to human flourishing. This approach to valuing nature begs further interpretation and opens the possibility for new and varied environmental truths. Such a position is not the only potentially valid approach, but it does fit strongly with a hermeneutic framing of environmental understanding and value.

Focusing on expanded human-interest further relates to the hermeneutic idea of truth as a event of meaning through dialogue. A position of expanded human-interest allows dialogue on two levels. First, considering a broad range of ways that humans interact with and benefit from nature allows for a genuine dialogue between people about the relative value of the environment. This encourages us to communicate our understanding of the natural world and relate to it environmental actions and policies. Second, weak anthropocentrism allows for a dialogue with the natural world through experiences, paralleling van Tongeren and Snellen's point about focusing on experienced moral connections.¹⁷⁵ If we are open to meaningful experiences of environments and nonhuman others, we understand them in new ways relating to, and revealing

¹⁷⁵ Van Tongeren and Snellen; "How Hermeneutics Might Save the Life of (Environmental) Ethics," 305-308. Van Tongeren and Snellen themselves argue for a "plurality of ethical experiences," though they see this as at least partly including views on nature having value for its own sake.

to us, many different types of value—though ultimately value for us. Such an approach fosters new questions about ecological value, allowing different people to find new answers that fit in their own particular horizon of understanding. The openness of an expanded human-interest approach is consistent with the dialogical truth found in hermeneutics.

To further argue for its hermeneutic value, I want to consider how enlightened human-interest encourages continuous re-interpretation along the three interrelated lines of identity, action, and the imagination. First, a broad and critical consideration of how humanity relies on and benefits from the nonhuman world encourages a constant re-interpretation of the self. Considering the variety of ways in which we need and benefit from the natural environment may encourage us to think further about what the aim of human existence is, or what the most worthwhile life is. To put this another way, thinking about how I can benefit from the environment in different ways encourages me to re-interpret both the environment and the good life. For example, considering how spending time in preserved natural areas contributes to positive mental health means both a new view on achieving human ends and a new understanding of nature as a source of positive experiences. My self-understanding, view of the good life, and understanding of the natural world are all connected; a broad notion of human environmental value encourages further interpretation of all three in relation.

Reconsidering different ways that the environment may be beneficial to us involves re-interpreting action in two different ways. The first, which is more practical, is re-interpreting my own actions in considering environmental experiences. For example, thinking about the aesthetic and recreational enjoyment of the environment may prompt me to take a vacation camping in a national park rather than visiting a large metropolitan area, since the former will be seen as a better use of time once I consider the particular benefits of experiencing nature. The second way

of re-interpreting action, which is more ethical, is reconsidering how my actions impact the environment. Even if I do not think of the natural world as having intrinsic value—and many people do not—there is still a big difference in how I interpret actions based on what kinds of value for people I see the environment as having. A person who views the environment as having mere material or economic benefits will interpret actions in line with the best utilization of those resources. In contrast, if I understand the natural world as benefitting myself and other persons in a broad range of ways, my interpretation of actions will be based partly on avoiding or limited actions that degrade things like ecosystem services or the aesthetic appreciation of nature. To follow the above example, if I believe myself and others gain enjoyment and other emotional benefits from experiences in nature, I will more likely have a negative interpretation of actions or policies that disturb protected environments. My view of the environment's benefit will change how I interpret my actions and the impact I imagine those actions having.

Last of all, an expanded view of environmental human-interest relates to the imagination. As discussed previously, it is not that I re-interpret the imagination, but that the imagination allows and facilitates new interpretations. The imagination gives me the capability to reconsider the natural world as broadly related to human interest. Being open to new ways to value and benefit from the environment both requires and engages a capability to see things in new ways—the imagination is necessary to conceive of these expanded interests and values. Likewise, enlightened human-interest in the environment and non-human others requires the imagination to conceive of new actions, both the actions that utilize and those that protect those interests. An expanded understanding of ecological value for people involves and facilitates new interpretations of the natural world along the same three lines of environmental interpretation that I focused on in preceding chapters: identity, action, and the imagination.

Approaching the value of the natural world from the perspective of enlightened human-interest, then, is a particularly hermeneutic approach. There are two other points I want to make to support this claim. One is that enlightened human-interest in the environment can further be supported by empirical sciences/scientific explanation, while nature's value for its own sake cannot be. The concept of nature having intrinsic value is difficult to fully argue, and as a value claim cannot really be explained or supported by explanatory science. However, a sufficiently broad notion of the instrumental value of nature can be supported by various forms of explanation. The natural sciences, as mentioned before, can support the understanding that humans need a stable biosphere for survival and health. Psychology can support the understanding that experiences with nature contribute to human mental wellness and overall flourishing. History and anthropology can support the understanding of nature as a part of cultural identity, such as the importance of wilderness in the United States or the spiritual importance of sacred lands for indigenous groups. These things all relate to human benefit and value in its most broad sense and can support environmental protection.

A second point I want to raise here involves the epistemology of intrinsic value. Environmental philosophers have struggled with exactly how to treat the notion of nonhuman others and natural environments having intrinsic value, since it is always humans who are doing the valuing. This issue relates particularly to environmental hermeneutics, where we see a bit of a clash between hermeneutics' emphasis on the interpreting human subject and the intrinsic value claims of non-anthropocentric positions. However, if we focus instead on the varieties of environmental value for humans, there is a clear reconciliation between interpreting and valuing the natural environment. Does the interpretive difficulty of nature's inherent value give us a good reason to abandon that concept? I consider this further in the next section, on the framework of a

hermeneutic notion of translation. From a somewhat practical perspective, however, it is worth noting that the intrinsic value of nature is murky, difficult to define, and largely irrelevant to many people. The varieties of environmental value for people are clear, experienced and felt by many, and consistent with a hermeneutic approach to environmental value.

To balance out my support for enlightened human-interest in the environment, I do want to address a few potential counterarguments as well. One could argue that accepting a form of weak anthropocentrism limits interpretation, since it excludes any notion of nature having intrinsic value. As such, some would argue, we should simply adopt a more pluralistic notion of value, which may include the intrinsic value of nature among others. We might refer to different positions such as anthropocentrism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism as interpretations in environmental ethics.¹⁷⁶ There is a potential problem with this pluralistic approach, however. These positions often frame themselves as strong normative positions, each being argued as *the* truth about the proper scope of moral valuation. This creates a tension; when trying to view these moral positions as mutual contributors to a pluralistic truth, are we ignoring or writing over their own meaning? In attempting to use these theories this way, are we as hermeneuticists forcing the meaning we want over a genuine understanding of these views? Further, the positions of taking humans, individual living things, or biotic communities as the center of moral consideration are contradictory views that are not easily merged together. Viewing these different approaches to environmental value as competing interpretations is hermeneutically right, but simply merging them all together as a normative approach is problematic.

¹⁷⁶ This is in fact the approach taken by Treanor, with narrative, and by van Tongeren and Snellien with ethical experience.

Another potential counterargument is that the debate between anthropo-, bio-, and ecocentrism is an old debate that we should move past. I am sympathetic to this view, but I have a few responses to it as well. First, as mentioned above, the understanding of environmental others as having inherent value or not has a large effect on what actions or policies can reasonably be interpreted as good or bad. Regardless of using or dropping the “-centric” labels, these basic positions have practical relevance. Secondly, the evaluation of these positions is, if nothing else, a helpful thought experiment. Environmental philosophy exists to think critically about environmental value, and I do believe this consideration is helpful for reflection on what kind of ethical positions can be supported through environmental interpretation.

That said, I do want to consider a few other views that have rejected the intrinsic value approach. To take an example from eco-phenomenology I want to look at “The Primacy of Desire” by Ted Toadvine, who uses phenomenology to critique the idea of intrinsic value in nature. Usual views of intrinsic value rely on either a kinship or a continuity view of humans and the natural world, both of which are reductive. Instead, Toadvine argues for an (eco)phenomenology of the impossible, utilizing the concept of the “*Il y ya*” (or “there is”) from various continental thinkers. Such a view leaves nature, to some extent, at the margins of perception or conceptualization; there is something about the natural world that impinges on us physically, and yet that we cannot fully address or understand. And yet, Toadvine argues that we feel a call to respond, a form of physical desire, which directs us ethically towards this wildness which we cannot fully articulate. We can still use ethical concepts to articulate how we respond to this call, but this call itself is beyond our conceptualization.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Ted Toadvine, “The Primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences,” in *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, ed. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 139-153.

While I am influenced by Toadvine's discussion of the otherness of nature, I am also wary of the implication that this otherness is something that presumably calls for ethical response. To be clear, Toadvine does not firmly say that this other has intrinsic value; in fact, he suggests moving away from that concept. And yet, he does suggest that an ethics of nature follows from this, calling us to respond to it. My concern is whether this suggestion implies something like intrinsic value, just on a different basis; if environmental others call us to respond to them, then such others are presumably deserving of a response. On the other hand, I would argue that this view is not incommensurable with expanded human interest. The people who feel the kind of pull from the natural world that Toadvine describes are usually the kind of people who enjoy experiences in nature. Responding to this otherness of nature is more complex than simple enjoyment, but it still relates to a fulfillment of oneself. I feel a responsibility to nature based on my own felt connection to it, which ultimately relates to my own fulfillment.

Another contemporary view is environmental pragmatism, which I want to consider through Weston's "Against Intrinsic Value." Weston argues that intrinsic value is both overly abstract and not helpful for practical environmental protection. Instead, he argues that environmental pragmatism focuses on what he labels immediate values, which arise from things like experiences or aesthetic enjoyment. Further, immediate values are justified not by abstract ideas but by being related to other values. Last of all, such values are sufficient for practical protection of the environment. Although he firmly denies weak anthropocentrism, Weston's pragmatism seems to at least implicitly accept expanded human interest, related to experience and aesthetics, as a justification for valuing nature.¹⁷⁸ Our felt or perceived valuing of the world relates to ways that the natural world benefits us. So we see a few cases where environmental

¹⁷⁸ Weston, "Beyond Intrinsic Value," 292-303.

philosophies that reject intrinsic value could be seen to likewise relate to a sufficiently expanded sense of human interest.

In closing out this section, I do not mean to suggest that enlightened human-interest is the only hermeneutically plausible approach to valuing nature. But I hope to have shown some of the benefits, from an interpretive perspective, to such an approach. To bring this full circle, however, I want to acknowledge that even when limiting the scope of environmental value to value for people, there is still a broad range of conflicting interpretations. Even focusing on enlightened human-interest gives us a broad range of possible understandings about those interests and the related values the environment may have. The various understandings may at times be equally valid without necessarily being easily coexistent. I return to this in the conclusion of this work, but to move forward I want to reconsider environmental value from another direction. This section has focused on environmental value from the perspective of openness, dialogue, and explanation. To take a slightly different track I want to focus on value as it relates more to the limits of understanding the ecological other.

Translating Nature

For another potential approach to considering how we value the natural world I want to take a brief detour through a hermeneutic view on translation, which can be found in both Gadamer and Ricoeur. Their respective ideas here, like their approaches to interpretation, are not identical but are similar enough to mutually contribute to a philosophy of environmental translation. This approach helps particularly in considering the limits of understanding environmental others and the natural world. To take this path I first touch on Gadamer's view on interpretation, as elaborated on by Grondin. Then I turn to Ricoeur, using both his own essays on

translation and Kearney's introduction to them. Finally, these hermeneutic notions of translation are applied to understanding and valuing the natural world.

To elaborate on translation, first, recall Gadamer's assertion that interpretation is only complete in application. Grondin argues that a proper view of what Gadamer means by application is more like translation, stating that understanding, application, and translation are roughly equivalent. To understand is to take a meaning that is foreign to me and put it into terms that I can comprehend and potentially communicate to others. This is a challenge that requires "finding words for *what needs and cries to be understood*."¹⁷⁹ Grondin goes on to state that while we try to understand things that are other, this can only occur in familiar language—even otherness itself must be put into familiar terms. It is important to note, as with hermeneutic understanding, that translation is never complete—we can always find better words for something. Last, Grondin suggests translation applies to anything interpreted. He uses scientific theories alongside foreign language and historical events as cases of something we seek to understand by putting it into more familiar language.¹⁸⁰

The hermeneutic expansion of translation can also be found in the work of Ricoeur. Beyond how we usually think of it, translation also is an appropriate way to think more generally about the conveyance of meaning. The role of translation, for Ricoeur, is to bring the text and the reader together without merely reducing one into the other, requiring what he calls linguistic hospitality. Respect for both languages means recognizing their difference and giving up on a perfect or ideal translation.¹⁸¹ Rather, good translation aims at equivalence, which Ricoeur

¹⁷⁹ Jean Grondin, "Gadamer's Basic Understanding of Understanding," in *A Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 43, emphasis added.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

¹⁸¹ Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 8-10; Richard Kearney, "Introduction: Ricoeur's Philosophy of Translation," in *On Translation*, xiv-xvi.

alternately refers to as the “construction of the comparable.” This latter phrasing is helpful in indicating that in translation we try to create something that is equivalent to the meaning of the text without being a perfect duplication. As such, the only way to critique a translation is to offer a different one—to provide a new equivalence, a better way to convey that meaning.¹⁸²

I briefly noted above how for Gadamer translation applies even within the same language. For Ricoeur as well, as long as I am using language, I am contending with the possibility of saying something in another way. Particularly, we never have access to an absolute meaning of the other. In communication with the other, I am always contending with some level of foreignness or strangeness. Further, for both Gadamer and Ricoeur translation always relates back to self, just like understanding. Whether I am engaging with another language or my own, I am always trying to put things in a new way to make things more comprehensible to *myself*. Even internally, as Kearney emphasizes, I am always trying to rephrase or translate things to give myself a new and hopefully better understanding.¹⁸³

One last point is to note that translation does not necessarily give us better comprehension. Translation *aims at* better equivalence or better understanding. And yet, as Ricoeur notes, by putting things into new words I can always make misunderstanding worse. When there is a lack of understanding, I might continue trying different words and statements to more clearly convey the meaning of what is being expressed. Just as reinterpretation does not always mean better understanding, translating something leads to understanding the meaning of

¹⁸² Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 22-25, 37.

¹⁸³ Grondin, “Gadamer’s Basic Understanding of Understanding,” 43; Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 25; Kearney, “Ricoeur’s Philosophy of Translation,” xvii-xx.

that thing differently, but necessarily in a better way. Further attempts at translation can always make meaning less equivalent and less clear.¹⁸⁴

To avoid repetition with the idea of interpreting and understanding nature, I want to narrow in right away on the ways in which translation adds something unique.¹⁸⁵ With this focus in mind I begin with considering what the limits of translation say about understanding ecological others before turning to the implications of this for considering the kind of value the environment can or cannot be said to have. First, translation is a better model for understanding nonhuman animals. I want to use pets as a model, just as something that most of us have familiarity with. We often try to translate our pets' facial expressions and behaviors into the closest human equivalent, at times leading to inaccurate attempts at understanding. For example, my cat usually looks angry; or rather, her face usually has an expression that resembles a human expression of anger. This is so even when there is no reason for her to be upset, or even when I have good reason to believe she is happy. For another example, we often associate cats purring with happiness, even though cats purr in response to both positive and negative factors, such as stress or pain in the latter. If I want to try to understand my cat, or a dog or any other pet, I have to try to translate her actions and sounds into words that make sense to me, to understand her in a way that is comprehensible to me.

And yet in doing so, as the above examples show, I have to remember the disconnect between her language and mine. It might be asked here if the term "language" is appropriate to refer to the actions and sounds of nonhuman animals. I would argue that, insofar as the actions,

¹⁸⁴ Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 25

¹⁸⁵ As translation largely parallels hermeneutic understanding for Gadamer and Ricoeur, much of what translation says about nature would repeat what I discussed in the second chapter of this work regarding interpreting and understanding the environment.

expressions, and sounds of a nonhuman animal convey meaning, it is a language of sorts. Most importantly, people often respond to the actions or expressions of animals as a meaningful conveyance, much like a language. It is our common response to it that firmly establishes animal utterance as at least a quasi-language.

Just as similar sounding words in two different human languages may mean different things, I have to remember that an animal's actions or sounds may not indicate the thing that seems the most obvious correlate to my language. Again, the ever-present angry expression of a cat or happy expression of a dog are good examples here. Further, I have to recall that even with human languages there is no universal middle ground, no third text as Ricoeur would say, and therefore no direct translation for every word.¹⁸⁶ Likewise, and even more so, for animals I have to recall that I will not be able to fully translate and understand every action and expression. I must remain content with a limited equivalence between a pet's expressions and what I can put into words meaningful to me. All of this is to say that I must recall linguistic hospitality and avoid reducing the language of the other fully into mine. There is a constant tension here, about which Ricoeur is particularly clear, between wanting to understand the other and forcing what the other is trying to say into my language. This tension should be remembered in our attempts to understand, which is to say to translate, animal others.

The same principles of translation apply to animal others beyond common pets. Livestock and wild animals likewise express themselves in different ways, and any attempt to understand them is better approached with the particular warnings of hermeneutic translation in mind. In attempting to understand any animal other, I must be cautious about the ways in which I try to place the others' expressions—actions, facial expressions, and sounds—into language that

¹⁸⁶ Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 22.

is comprehensible to me. Above all else, I must be wary of translating animal expressions to myself in ways that falsely convey human thinking, meaning, or intentionality. As people we frequently over-conceptualize animals, especially pets, into beings with overly human qualities. An appropriately modified linguistic hospitality of animals means recognizing the differences between their ‘languages’ and ours, and the real differences between animals and ourselves.¹⁸⁷

In addition, beyond animal others, to what extent can we understand plants and trees? Plants indicate better or worse biological health through their appearance, but do not convey meaning in the way people or even nonhuman animals do. Even the physical indication of plant health must be understood more as a visible biological sign, than an intentional act. Translating plants, and other nonhuman entities outside of animals, is therefore very limited. Speaking of trees as being happy or sad, for example, may be reducing them into human terms without regard for the real existence of plants. Talking about plants in ways that invoke emotion or intention is to reduce their language, for want of a better term, entirely into the language of humans. I want to be clear that I am using ‘language’ in a very limited sense here; trees and other plants do not deliberately express themselves the way animals do. In attempting to understand plants, or other nonanimal living things, I create an equivalence of sorts that helps me put them into terms relevant to me. But certain limits should be appreciated.

The notion of translation might be further helpful in thinking about ecosystems or biotic communities. It is not uncommon for people to speak of biotic communities as if they are more of a singular entity than a collection of individuals. In truth, however, biotic communities are made up of individual living things. In terms of a translation model of understanding nature, it

¹⁸⁷ I want to note my use of languages as a plural here. We sometimes speak of nonhuman animals as a single group. However, at least on the level of species we would have different languages; cats, dogs, and cows, for example, would all express themselves differently, each constituting a separate animal language of sorts.

might be more appropriate to think of a biotic community almost like an international meeting—a room of diverse individuals expressing themselves in multiple languages, with some of those languages being more similar to and more different from others. As such, understanding the ecosystem would mean translating the different members of the system, much like understanding a room of diverse language speakers would mean translating every language.

On the other hand, given the limited range of expression of many nonhuman living things, one could potentially try to translate the biotic community as a whole. In this sense we might think of the different sights, sounds, and scents as all making up one general language for a particular biotic group, for example the living things in one particular forest. As such, I could try to translate this into understanding the community. Again, I should be aware of the appropriate limits of language. The expressions of the biological community can indicate biological health or disease, presence of threats, and so forth. For example, the absence of certain sounds could indicate a threatening presence in a wood, or unusual scents could indicate a biological imbalance in a particular ecosystem. I can translate the overall language of the biotic community in certain *limited* ways. What I should not do is try to impute some kind of overall human mood or agency to the biologic community as if it really is a single conscious entity. The same limits that we see in translating animals or plants applies to the biotic community overall. It is normal to try to translate nonhuman others or communities into words and ways of thinking that make sense to me—after all, that is the only way I can try to understand them. But it is important to remember not to try to reduce the other too fully into my language.

The question then is, what does this all have to do with valuing nature? The point is that the notion of the inherent goodness of nature goes too far beyond what is untranslatable about

nonhuman others.¹⁸⁸ If we want to consider the for-its-own-sake of nonhuman others, as biocentric or ecocentric positions try to do, then we have to consider how to translate or understand the other's own good. To affirm the intrinsic value of animals, plants, or ecosystems would mean that I can take what it means to be that kind of being and translate it into my language in a really meaningful way, as if I could understand that as well as I understand foreign words.¹⁸⁹ This is taking the language—again used loosely—of the other and reducing it forcefully into my language, into terms that make sense to me. The better approach to is accept the untranslatable aspects of nonhuman others, to allow them to be in their otherness.

If we do want to consider the well-being of nonhuman others, we can do so in mostly biological terms through the natural sciences. Zoologists can translate the actions of animals, explaining how different behaviors relate to different purposes. Further, plant biologists and ecologists could also translate physical aspects of other living things, explaining the ways in which certain aspects of physical conditions and biological functions indicate healthy or illness for different living things, or likewise for biological communities. This is a helpful way to translate the natural world and nonhuman living things, which may allow us to consider some notion of their own good. That said, though, the notion of intrinsic value seems a little thin if it is based merely on biological health. I question whether it is perhaps reductive to consider nonhuman living things this way. This is a difficult tension; on the one side we have the problem of reducing nonhuman living things merely to physical things, and on the other side we have the problem of forcing nonhuman living things too far into our language, holding how we want to

¹⁸⁸ Van Tongeren and Snellen briefly make a similar point, arguing that “it is impossible for human beings to ‘step outside’ the interpretive sphere and fully grasp the ‘real’ worth and needs of the natural environment in itself.” They approach this from a general hermeneutic position, rather than translation, and do not fully address the implications of this. Van Tongeren and Snellen “How Hermeneutics Might Save the Life of (Environmental) Ethics.” 312.

¹⁸⁹ I am using terms like “animal” or “plant” here for simplicity. It would be more appropriate to say that discussing the intrinsic value of a cat means I can translate cat-ness, or dog-ness, or maple-tree-ness, etc.

understand them over and against their own meaning.

There is no single approach or right answer on how to translate nature. That said, one possible approach is to consider a broad spectrum of ways to understand environmental others in human terms. I can seek to translate the natural world in the terms of the environmental sciences, certainly, understanding all the ways that nonhuman others maintain a biosphere that also supports human life. But I can also translate nature aesthetically and recreationally, understanding the biotic community through experiences that are physically, emotionally, or spiritually beneficial to myself and other people. One way to translate nature might embrace a bit of a sense of wonder, accepting the existence of the natural world as something that I cannot fully put into words, that I cannot fully understand. One way of creating equivalence between human language and understanding nature in its own terms, then, is focusing on the various ways that human beings can experience and value nature—while also respecting that certain aspects of the environment cannot be put into words. Another thing to consider is that when I try to understand the language of the other, I do not just replace words as such but also utilize context. In a face-to-face situation this might include things like tone and body language as symbols to help approximate meaning. Likewise, I should utilize various ways of thinking about nature in order to value it, considering different forms of understanding and experiencing the environment as symbols to help produce meaning for me.

Translating nature can also relate to the views of eco-phenomenology and environmental pragmatism discussed above. Though Weston focuses more on experience than I do, his idea of immediate value and my view on translating nature are similar in the notion of focusing on how we make sense of our feelings regarding the natural world. Further, Weston's notion of immediate value denies a full conceptual explanation, allowing room for felt value—this relates

to the limits of translation, accepting that we cannot put the environmental other fully into our terms.¹⁹⁰ The limits of translation also connect with Toadvine's view on the otherness of nature. As mentioned above, Toadvine argues for a view that respects the ways nature is at the margins of perception, that the natural world is something we cannot fully address.¹⁹¹ A hermeneutic view of translation likewise accepts that nature is beyond our full conceptualization. I do not mean to suggest that either Toadvine or Weston's view is the same as my view of translating nature—particularly, I do not think either would agree with my view on expanded human-interest. There is, however, a similarity between Toadvine, Weston, and myself in terms of valuing nature in ways that make sense to oneself while also respecting the limits on conceptualizing nature.

Returning to my own view on a hermeneutic translation of nature, I argue this ultimately supports an expanded notion of valuing nature for the sake of people, furthering the case for expanded human-interest as discussed in the previous section. An expanded human appreciation of nature, including an appropriate sense of wonder for the ineffable, is at least a potential approach to think about translating ecological others in a way that allows us to value the natural world. I cannot firmly say that intrinsic value positions are wrong, but I do have concerns about whether they are reductive in their own way, forcing environmental others too far into human conceptualization. Being open to various ways of understanding and valuing nature for the sake of expanded human interest is a good meeting ground between human understanding and the otherness of the natural world.

There are three last related points I want to return to in concluding about translation.

¹⁹⁰ Weston, "Beyond Intrinsic Value," 292-303.

¹⁹¹ Toadvine, "The Primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences," 139-153.

First, I want to repeat the point that translation always applies to the other, to that which is foreign or strange, which cannot fully be known to me. While we can speak of different ways of understanding nature and compare them as better or worse, it is important to remember that we can never fully translate and never fully understand nonhuman others, whether it be pets, wild animals, plants, or biotic communities. Second, recall Grondin's assertion that there is always a better way to translate and Ricoeur's assertion that the only genuine way to critique a translation is to offer a potentially better one. Whatever view we take of the environment, there are always alternative, possibly better ways of translating, understanding, and valuing the natural world. Our translation/understanding of nonhuman others is, at most, the best one we have so far. We can never say that we are understanding the environment the correct way, because there are always possibly better ways of translating or understanding nonhuman others and the natural world.

The third point I want to return to is Ricoeur's brief note that in attempting to clarify things further by putting things into new words and phrases, we can always make misunderstanding worse. Any time I try communication or explain something further in order to make it clearer, I actually run the risk that the other will understand it less. This potential problem also applies to trying to explain the natural world. If we try too hard to put environmental others into words, we run the risk of actually understanding them less (or worse) rather than more. Even here I risk misunderstanding by trying too hard to conceptualize environmental others and thus muddling things further. Nonetheless, this point is a helpful reminder of the limits of translation, further supporting the need to respect the otherness of nature. These three points taken together show that understanding nature is always a limited translation of the other, that such understandings are critiqued by new and better translations, and that further attempts to conceptualize nature can always risk misunderstanding.

As a final point about translation I want to refer briefly again to environmental capability and concept. Focusing on the idea of translating nature in the ways that are conceivable to us and communicable to others, and at the same time maintaining an appropriate distance for the otherness of nature, might help us to partly limit conflicting interpretations and give us grounds for valuing certain views of the natural world. The better interpretations or translations of the natural world are those that deeply make sense to us as more than just conceptual phrases. Further, the better translations are those that we can deeply understand and articulate, which means also those that we can communicate to others. Hermeneutic truth focuses on meaning rather than on facts, and likewise should focus on truths that are meaningful to us and not overly abstract or too conceptually distant to be deeply understood. Focusing on translation can further our environmental capabilities, to not only understand and value the natural world in new ways, but to do so in ways that are sharable with others. At the same time, this does not eliminate the conflict of environmental interpretation. There will always be various appropriate ways to translate ecological others and the natural world, some of which will be irreconcilable. The best aim for understanding the environment is the equivalence between the other and myself, which can never be perfect or complete.

Possibility and Limits

To follow my discussion of capability and conflict in previous chapters I briefly want to reflect on possibilities and limits raised in this chapter. A hermeneutic frame illuminates several possibilities in regard to environmental understanding. If we are open to new meaning, we have the possibility of understanding the environmental in different ways. As such understanding is complete in application, it further means that we can understand the environment in ways that are particularly relevant to us. In particular, a framework of expanded human-interest opens

possibilities for experiencing and understanding the natural world in ways that are particularly relevant to ourselves. Translation further shows how we understand things that are different from us by putting them into meaningful terms. This again shows not only our potential for understanding in new ways but understanding in ways that are particularly meaningful to us and ways that we can communicate to others.

Paralleling the conflict of interpretation in previous chapters, we also see limits for environmental understanding and value. A hermeneutic conception of truth, based on openness to new meaning, allows for various interpretations of environmental value. This places a limit on the kind of firm normative claims we can make regarding the natural world. While we can recognize conflicting views on ecological value as potential interpretations, we cannot say that one of those views is truer than the others. Therefore, we cannot make strong moral claims based on a particular conception of environmental value. Translation likewise highlights certain limits in environmental understanding. In translation, we can never fully put the language of the other into our own. Using this as a model for understanding ecologically others, we see that we can never fully understand nonhuman others or the natural world. In particular, this means we cannot fully understand what is good for nonhuman others the way we understand what is good for ourselves. These further limits the notion of intrinsic value as a normative concept, since it would entail knowing what the good for others is. With this in place we can turn to the overall implications of a hermeneutic philosophy for environmental ethics.

CHAPTER 6

THE CONFLICT OF ENVIRONMENTAL INTERPRETATION

To conclude, I want to reiterate the main themes and consider the relevance of my thought for environmental philosophy. As stated in the introduction, my primary concern here has been the implications of hermeneutics for thinking philosophically about how we understand and value the natural world. To do so, I first want to review my ideas regarding environmental capability and particularly conflict. With these ideas fresh in mind I want to briefly consider some of the possibilities for environmental consideration that can be seen in my work. I end by considering the implications of my work for the hermeneutic limits on environmental ethics and philosophy, which is the main theme of my project.

The central claim I have been building up to in this work is that a hermeneutic environmental philosophy highlights the limits on our understanding and valuing of nonhuman others and the natural world. There are really three aspects to this, all of which are consequences of a properly hermeneutic understanding of environmental consideration. The first is that *disagreements* over environmental values are really *conflicting interpretations* of the natural world, which means they are both complicated and difficult to resolve. The second relates to the limits of environmental understanding; since our relationship to the environment is primarily through interpretation, this places distinct limits on what we can know and, in turn, on our normative ecological claims. The third relates to an oft-repeated claim of this work that a hermeneutic approach does not necessarily show that positive claims about environmental value are better or more valid interpretations than the negative claims. These three things together highlight the tension between philosophical hermeneutics and environmental ethics.

Reviewing Capability and Conflict

I want to begin by recapping the theme of capability and conflict. Although this may seem redundant, it helps situate us to consider the full implications here. First, we should review environmental capability. The main point, as I stressed in the second chapter, is that interpretation is always ongoing. Our understanding of the natural world and our environmental identities are always changing as we continually interpret ourselves and the environment through new experiences and encounters—not just experiences of nature, but any experience our encounter that relates to how we think about the natural world. Likewise, our ecological actions are meaningful, which means we can understand actions in new ways and thereby change our actions for the better. Actions particularly relate to both my understanding of the worthwhile life and to shared communal values, which are open to change and potentially striving to be better. Last of all, the imagination is what gives us the capability to understand the environment differently. Most important here is that the imagination emphasizes how through narratives—both fictional and historical—we can see ourselves, the environment, and the two in relation in new ways. We can also see, with the social imaginary, how society can potentially move towards more environmental forms of organization.

Through identity, action, and the imagination we saw how we have the capability for new environmental interpretations and understandings. We also saw a parallel to this in Chapter 5 under the consideration of possibilities. We have the possibility for new—even if we cannot say better—understandings of the natural world and our relationship to it. For hermeneutics, we can arrive at truth when we are open to new meanings, and this applies as well to an openness to new views of the environment, as well as new understandings of various things as they relate to the environment. We see this further through application and translation; we understand things by

putting them into terms that are meaningful to us and contextualizing them within our own horizon. And so, we have the possibility for understanding the natural world and ecological others in ways that are meaningful to us, that are relevant to our own concerns.

The more important theme for my work is the related analysis of conflicts and limits. A basic consideration of environmental understanding and values as being interpretations, the primary claim of a hermeneutic environmental philosophy, already shows the most immediate difficulty for conflicting views of the natural world. There will often be multiple interpretations of the environment, particularly regarding value, which contradict each other without one being clearly more plausible than the other. There is no easy way to resolve this; since environmental understanding is interpretation, it is not possible to declare a clear, “correct” answer on ecological value. Further, re-interpretations and changes in environmental understanding can always move towards or away from different kinds of appreciation for the natural world—re-interpreting the natural world does not necessarily mean greater moral consideration of ecological others or the natural world as whole.

We see the conflict of interpretation even more clearly with the consideration of environmental identity. My interpretation of nature, whether this refers to my interpretation of nonhuman others, a particular landscape, or the environment as a whole, exists in relation to my own self-understanding. Disagreements over environmental values are deep and difficult because they relate back to our own self-understanding; when I disagree with another’s ecological views, I am not simply challenging her opinion on something but ultimately challenging aspects of herself. We see this further with narrative. My environmental identity, and thus my understanding and valuation of the natural world, exists in relation to things like events in my life, places I have lived, and my encounters with others. Conflicts over environmental values are

tense because they are conflicts over deeply held beliefs based on fundamental aspects of our identities, our backgrounds, and our communities. Disagreements over ecological values are ultimately conflicts of environmental interpretations and identities.

This conflict can be seen as well in a hermeneutic consideration of environmental action. Since ecological actions are meaningful, they are likewise interpreted differently by various people in potentially valid ways, leaving us with equally plausible but irreconcilable views of proper action in relation to the natural world. This is especially difficult, in comparison to values and identities, as actions are often viewed and debated as practical facts and not always recognized as disagreements over meanings. A narrative framing of environmental action further highlights this conflict, particularly as it relates back to moral identity. A person's interpretation of meaningful action is in a circular relationship with both an individual's view of the most worthwhile life as well as judgment of oneself as capable of good moral decisions. Challenges to my view of environmental action are also challenges to my view of the good life and to my judgment of myself as a capable moral agent, at least as far as the latter two relate to ecological considerations. Further, conflicts over environmental action relate to shared group values concerning the natural world, particularly through the constitutive rules of actions. Disagreements over ecological actions, therefore, are conflicting interpretations about deep aspects of ourselves and our communities.

The environmental imagination helps to clarify a key point about the conflict of environmental interpretation, which is the other side of environmental capabilities. We have conflicting understandings of the natural world, our ecological selves, and environmental actions because of our capability, through the imagination, to see and understand things in new ways. It is easy to think of non-concern for the environment as stale and uncritical while thinking of

ecological consideration as new and deeply engaged. However, less concern for nonhuman others or the natural world can result from the re-interpretations and the creation of new values that we gain through the productive imagination. We can see this further with the narrative imagination, which highlights how conflicting views can result from different interpretations of and responses to the same fictional and historical narratives. Last of all, the social imagination highlights how our shared bonds and drive for positive changes contribute to these conflicts. The imagination gives us the capability for new environmental understanding, which likewise means new disagreements and new conflicts of interpretation.

Following conflicts, we can see the limits of a hermeneutic environmental philosophy through the concepts of truth and translation. Hermeneutic truth is possible when we are genuinely interpreting with an openness to new meaning. While openness to new meaning can lead to greater ecological consideration, it can also mean new interpretations that view the natural world as having less value or deserving only instrumental consideration. We cannot necessarily consider interpretations of environmental value as being more valid or true than interpretations that consider otherwise. Translation further shows the limits of a hermeneutic approach to the environment. Just as we can never fully translate another language into our own, we cannot fully translate environmental others into human terms without speaking over them. The better approach is to aim for a recognition of meaning between languages; likewise, we should attempt to translate or understand environmental others in ways that are meaningful to us while respecting their otherness. This means certain limits on environmental understanding and ecological value.

Practical Environmentalism and Ecological Capability

A hermeneutic environmental philosophy does indeed support environmental values. As I

have argued throughout this work, valuing or appreciating the natural world are always potential interpretations. Beyond that, I stated above that the conflict of environmental interpretations would not leave us with moral relativism; towards that end we can consider practical environmentalism as a minimum environmental ethic. A general understanding of biology and ecology, along the lines of what could reasonably be expected from a basic education, would lead us to understand that we both need the environment and damage the environment.¹⁹² As such, the plausible interpretations of better or worse actions should be limited by practical environmental concern. Actions that damage the environment, at least in ways relevant to human life and health, are bad actions. Good actions, in contrast, are those that at least seek to minimize harm to the biosphere's ability to support human life. This may not be a very appealing norm for environmentalists, however, keep in mind that I am not denying the potential value of the environment beyond this. Rather, we can limit the field of plausible interpretations by saying that at minimum we should protect the environment for the sake of people. Further appreciations of the natural world are still potentially valid interpretations, as are the related views on appropriate environmental action.

We can limit the conflict of environmental interpretation, about both the natural world and related human actions, with the claim that our need for a healthy natural environment is an irrefutable understanding of things. This still leaves us with a range of possible interpretations from mere reliance on the environment on one end, up to nature deserving its own direct moral consideration on the other, with no clear way to decide between them. These various interpretations can potentially all align on the need for environmental conservation for human

¹⁹² This is especially true if, following Ricoeur's model of explanation and understanding, we give credence to the environmental sciences to help differentiate better interpretations.

needs. For example, someone who merely acknowledges that we need the planet to live, another person who appreciates nature for her broader benefit, and a third person who believes nonhuman others exist for their own sake, can all potentially agree at least on the practical need for reducing human damage to the natural world. These same three people will most likely disagree on what kind of environmental protection is sufficient enough but can at least agree on basic environmental protection as a minimum. For example, if I value the environment for my benefit and another person believes ecosystems have value for their own sake, we will disagree on what extent of climate action is needed—but we will likely agree that some action is necessary to avoid the worst effects of climate change. A hermeneutic approach to environmental value may not lead to appreciating nature as much as some environmentalists would like. Nonetheless, the conflict of environmental interpretation does not mean that we need to accept ecological catastrophe.

I should point out that this is all true within our current historical and ecological situation. The understanding that humans rely on the biosphere for our ability to live is a valid understanding of human biology and ecology—for all of human history up to the present. However, as a hypothetical, what if there is a point in the future where technology advances so much that all human biological needs can be met through artificial production, with no reliance on a healthy environment? If this were the case, would a complete denial of ecological value, even to humans, be a plausible interpretation? If we could exist and even flourish without the natural world, then perhaps the environment no longer has value—at least as one potential interpretation among others. Nonetheless, at present the need to minimize ecological harm and climate change is an undeniable reality of our current situation.

The consideration of practical environmentalism is meant to show the edges of a

hermeneutic environmental ethic. First, the notion that we do not need the environment is not widely held in general and rarely argued for in academia. That is to say, I am not really arguing against anyone in making this claim. Rather, the argument regarding practical environmentalism merely shows how a hermeneutic consideration of nature is not fully relative, as we can set out some interpretations as just implausible. Secondly, I still think the best approach to environmental ethics hermeneutically is broad human-interest, as I argued in the previous chapter. This again, however, is a particular interpretation. My aesthetic and recreational enjoyment of nature is bound up in my own understanding, especially as it relates to place-based aspects of my identity, traditions, and history. Others, in their own horizons of understanding, may interpret things differently.

As a second point on environmental possibilities, I want to return to the theme of human capability particularly as it relates to moral agency. In discussing narrative and action, I brought up self-esteem, the interpretation of oneself as able to judge and act well. In the case of environmental concern, this could lead an individual to view herself as capable of being ecologically responsible, a challenge to oneself to do in better regarding her environmental actions and impact. Further, in discussing the narrative imagination I addressed Ricoeur's assertion that for the self a sense of moral agency arises in response to the expectations of others. I reviewed this as a notion of ecological agency, a self-affirmation of my responsibilities regarding the environment. Between these, we see the idea of the environmentally capable human. An individual is able to respond to the challenge of the ecological moral crisis, to affirm her self-interpreted capabilities and moral responsibility.

Yet, here again we return to conflict—to an extent. It is easy to argue for the moral goodness of people as a response to environmental issues, that people ought to care about the

environmental because they are capable of doing so.¹⁹³ Hale, for example, argues that we “We should be environmentalists because it is *right*, because we have the capacity to be better than nature.” Though Hale’s full argument is more complex than this, he bases environmentalism on the need for humans to justify their actions, without really giving good reasons why justification leads to environmentalism. I am, however, a little wary of this argument, as it seems to assume that protecting the natural world is in some way good, which brings us back to questions about environmental value. The idea that human goodness somehow involves environmental protection may be considered a solid claim to the extent that maintaining ecological functioning is necessary for human life and health, as noted above. Any link between human goodness and environmental care beyond that is just another interpretation, possibly valid but not necessarily true.

Though we cannot escape this issue, perhaps we can give a little more weight to human environmental goodness by appealing to the concept of recognition. Ricoeur argues that human capabilities demand to be recognized—though my capabilities begin with self-interpretation, I want that interpretation to be affirmed by others who recognize my ability to, among other things, act morally.¹⁹⁴ Whether I seek this recognition from ecological others depends on my interpretation of those others. However, we live in a global community that increasingly sees ecological others and the natural world as deserving moral considerability. Though it is not an objective fact, environmental value, both for and beyond human reliance on nature, is a widely shared interpretation that is increasingly held by more people. This could, perhaps, steer moral capabilities and agency towards environmental concern. If I seek recognition from others, and

¹⁹³ Hale, *The Wild and the Wicked*, 8, original emphasis.

¹⁹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, “Asserting Personal Capabilities and Pleading for Mutual Recognition,” in *A Passion for the Possible*, 24-25.

those others mostly believe in ecological value, this could lead me to seeing my moral agency align with the environmental expectations of other people. Mutual recognition could lead us to act towards ecological protection in order to satisfy communally and societally shared views regarding the natural world. This is neither a given nor an objective truth, but an optimistic possibility regarding environmental value. Practical environmentalism and ecological recognition, then, give us a few positive considerations regarding interpretation and the natural world. Despite these possibilities, the primary issue remains that we cannot strongly favor direct concern for the natural world as a better or more valid understanding.

The Limits of Environmental Ethics

From a hermeneutic perspective, we cannot argue that ecological others or the natural world deserve direct moral consideration; nor can we argue exactly at what level that consideration would take place, as more than merely possible interpretations among others. There are three aspects to this claim. First, hermeneutics shows us that environmental values are very deep and personal. Academically, we can discuss values, identity, and actions as being separate things, but in lived experience these are all bound up together in interpretation and the imagination. Other thinkers, both in environmental hermeneutics specifically and in environmental philosophy more broadly, have discussed how things like stories and experiences are more likely to change people's environmental views and values than factual arguments are, which can be shown through a hermeneutic and narrative consideration. What is further helpful to see here, I argue, is why environmental disagreements are so deeply personal and contentious. As I have mentioned through the second and third chapters, challenges to people's environmental views are often taken, if only implicitly, as challenges to their identities, including their own moral capabilities and the goodness of their communities. Conflicts over environmental views

are really debates about interpretations, but not just interpretations of the environment; they are debates over our self-interpretations of the most meaningful aspects of ourselves and our ways of life.

What this means is that, if environmentalists want to positively influence consideration of the natural world, we need to look at things like identities and communities. Perhaps the idea of translation is helpful here as well. As we saw in the previous chapter, a hermeneutic view of translation considers how we understand things by putting them into familiar terms—applying this not just to different languages, but different vocabularies and professional terminologies and such. To make environmental values more understandable to others, we need to consider the particular social role, history, and community of the other and put ecological concerns in terms that would be more comprehensible to them. It might be helpful, as well, to consider local environmental issues, or at least the local impacts of global environmental problems—this would help people apply environmental values to their own situation. This idea itself relates to another issue, which is my own limited understanding of the community, history, and local issues of the other—that is, the gap between the horizon of the other and myself.

The second key point, then, is that hermeneutics helps to show the limits of environmental understanding. We can see this limit through identity, action, and the imagination, in the distance between my understanding of the environment and another person's understanding of it. A critical idea in hermeneutics is that we can understand the text but can never get in the mind of the author. Likewise, in many cases I cannot fully understand another person's views on the environment, since they are inevitably based on their identity, community, region, history, and so forth. This is most relevant when it comes to views on the natural world that are largely different from my own—which relates back to environmental disagreements. The

limits on environmental understanding can be seen further in translation. I can only understand nonhuman others in human terms, in my language; this reveals limits on the ways in which we can and do understand different nonhuman others and parts of the natural world. Translation makes it difficult to consider certain kinds of environmental value, since we cannot fully know what the good-to-them is for ecological others. The issue of environmental understanding, on both levels, relates to the difficulties with validating some environmental interpretations while denying others.

To elaborate, saying that one view or interpretation of the environment is correct would require some kind of absolute knowledge, which we simply do not have. Competing interpretations of the environment are equally potentially valid because they are based on different individual and communal identities that are no more or less legitimate than others. Environmental hermeneutics implies a notion of ecological finitude. All human knowledge is limited by our own horizons of understanding. Likewise, my understanding of the environment is in various ways limited both by my own contexts and horizons, as well as by the general limits of human knowledge. This should not be taken pessimistically; for hermeneutics, especially in Gadamer, our historical horizon is both the limit of our understanding but also the means to expand it. Our ecological finitude is not a relativistic denial of environmental understanding, merely a realistic acknowledgement of our limits.

I want to take a brief detour to consider this finitude in relation to the natural sciences, which I noted in previous chapters in relation to a dialectic of explanation and understanding. In light of considering an ecological finitude, it is worth noting as well that the environmental sciences themselves are subject to certain limits. A simple look at the history of science shows how scientific inquiry in the past has been constrained by both the boundaries of previous

knowledge and the prejudices of societies at the time.¹⁹⁵ Likewise, the ecological sciences today are limited both by the current edge of scientific development and the particular horizon of contemporary societies. The point being that the environmental sciences are not exempt from or a bridge out of ecological finitude but are also subject to it.

Following the limits on environmental understanding, the third key point is that a hermeneutic environmental philosophy gives us distinct limits on normative ecological claims. To put this another way, a properly hermeneutic environmental philosophy cannot argue moral consideration of the natural world as a necessarily true claim. The preceding chapters have shown how interpretation leaves us with conflicting, but equally plausible, views of the natural world. Interpretations of the natural world as lacking its own value or not deserving direct moral consideration are potentially just as valid as views of the environment as deserving more direct moral consideration or being inherently good in some way. Further, even if we focus in on positive views of the environment, we still have equally valid competing claims about how much value the natural world has, which aspects of it are the focus of that value, and what this means for practical actions. This second point may not be much of an issue; I suspect many environmental ethicists would accept a plurality of positive environmental values. Considering the validity of views against intrinsic ecological value will be more contentious.

A major implication of the conflict of environmental interpretations is that hermeneutics may not give environmental ethicists the philosophy that they want. Much of the work done in environmental hermeneutics appears to begin with the assumption that the environment deserves moral consideration in some way or to some extent, but a hermeneutic approach may go against

¹⁹⁵ For example, Robert L. Heilbroner notes that the development of science and technology is limited both by existing technology and by various aspects of a given society, "Do Machines Make History," *Technology and Culture* 8, no. 3 (1967), 335-345.

this. And this may, to some extent, be a reflection of a larger issue in environmental ethics and philosophy: much of the work in this field attempts to use philosophy to justify environmental views and values, however, there may be cases where the philosophy used does not necessarily justify the environmental conclusions reached.¹⁹⁶ It is worth repeating that nothing about a hermeneutic approach, as far as I can see, goes against the spirit of environmental philosophy that the natural world deserves our attention. But it does limit our ability to make strong moral claims about environmental values or ecological responsibilities. This does not mean a full-on environmental relativism, as I discussed in the previous section. But it does mean accepting that strong moral claims about ecological others and the natural world need to be taken as merely one possible interpretation among others.

Conclusion

A hermeneutic environmental philosophy shows us limits on environmental ethics. Using the philosophies of Gadamer and Ricoeur as my framework, I have argued that our understanding of the environmental is ultimately interpretation, related equally to identity, action, and the imagination. These three aspects highlight various conflicts regarding environmental interpretation. I further used a hermeneutic notion of translation to highlight limits on our understanding of ecological others. From this we saw the capability of people to have new understandings of valuation of nature, which can include greater valuing of the nature world, but can also include instrumentalizing views of the environment. My main point has been to highlight the tensions between hermeneutics and any environmental ethic that argues people necessarily ought to give direct moral consideration to ecological others or the natural world.

¹⁹⁶ Weston gives an exceptional overview of environmental philosophers struggling with this predicament, particularly as it relates to intrinsic value, "Beyond Intrinsic Value," 290-292.

My hope is that this work ultimately raises an important challenge for environmental hermeneutics and more broadly for environmental philosophy. Beyond the minimum of human reliance on nature, can we show environmentally positive interpretations to be better than negative views on the environment? Can we firmly claim that ecological others or the natural world deserves strong moral consideration? What makes an interpretation of the environment better or worse? My aim here has been to show the depth and severity of these questions, and in relation to highlight the problematic assumptions about value that are commonplace in environmental philosophies. As we address the moral questions of our ecological crisis, there will always be conflicts of environmental interpretations.

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