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Restoring the Garden of Eden: A Ricoeurian view of the ethics of environmental entrepreneurship

Nuria Toledano 

Business Management and Marketing
Department, University of Huelva,
Huelva, Spain

Correspondence

Nuria Toledano, Business Management
and Marketing Department, University
of Huelva, Campus "El Carmen", Avda. de
las Fuerzas Armadas, s/n, 21007 Huelva,
Spain.
Email: toledano@dem.uhu.es

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Abstract

Environmental entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a means of solving pressing environmental problems; because of this, it is often perceived as an ethical variant of entrepreneurial activity. However, we argue that this perception is flawed since ethics is assumed (not explained) on the premise of its identification with green activities or environmental ideals and intentions. This paper examines this problem and addresses the question of how we can know when, and if, environmental entrepreneurship is ethical. As a solution, we adopt Paul Ricoeur's approach to ethics. We argue that the Ricoeurian ethics, with its focus on actions and relationships and its logic of hyperbolic generosity, provides a consistent ethical framework in which to develop our comprehension of ethics in the environmental entrepreneurship field. In particular, Ricoeur's ethical approach brings a distinctive trait to the ethics of environmental entrepreneurship through an other-oriented disposition and a normative standard—to give without any expectations—that can be used to judge ethics in relational actions. The paper can also be of use to environmental entrepreneurs seeking a practical ethical guide that helps them in their decision making, and to policymakers committed with the promotion of responsible environmental businesses.

KEYWORDS

environmental entrepreneurs, environmental entrepreneurship, ethics, Paul Ricoeur, responsible entrepreneurship

1 | INTRODUCTION

Climate change, deforestation, species loss, and environmental degradation are pressing problems that reflect, in part, the imbalance between human beings and nature. Academics, practitioners, policymakers, and activists denounce the environmental abuses committed by the capitalist system and appeal to the responsibility of entrepreneurial agents to address the urgent environmental challenges (Balakrishnan et al., 2003; Blundel et al., 2013; Markman et al., 2016). In this context, environmental entrepreneurship¹

has been identified as a kind of entrepreneurship appropriate for producing the right solutions (e.g., Lenox & York, 2011; O'Neil & Ucbasaran, 2016; Vedula et al., 2021; York et al., 2016).

The central idea of environmental entrepreneurship is that entrepreneurial activities need not undermine the natural environment but can contribute to restoring nature and ecosystems (Antolin-Lopez et al., 2019). Environmental entrepreneurs are seen as being endowed with the ability and ambition needed to achieve these aims and to transform the world into a better place (Phillips, 2013; Schaltegger, 2010; York et al., 2016). This perception also ascribes

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environmental entrepreneurs with a stereotypical identity that is already imbued with exceptional moral character; they are considered as ideal actors who work for the common good and are therefore often ethically endorsed and approved (Gregori et al., 2021; York & Venkataraman, 2010).

However, identifying environmental entrepreneurs as ethical individuals raises at least two important problems. On the one hand, there is the issue of identifying “green” activities, environmental ideals, and intentions with actual ethical behavior; on the other hand, there is the problem of the content of ethical behavior as this, although assumed, is not explicitly explained. These two problems are not unconnected, and they are often used in a complementary way to characterize environmental entrepreneurship as an ethical variant of entrepreneurship (e.g., Gregori et al., 2021; Kirkwood & Walton, 2014; Markman et al., 2016; Phillips, 2013; Salmivaara & Kibler, 2020; Tilley, 1999). The purpose of this article is to examine these problems and propose a solution. Specifically, we address the question of how we can know when, and if, environmental entrepreneurship is ethical by turning to Paul Ricoeur for guidance.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur² (1913–2005) is considered to be one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century (Wall et al., 2002). Ricoeur builds a great part of his ethical arguments using the narrative resources of the Judeo-Christian tradition, such as the symbol of divine creation or God's command to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (e.g., Ricoeur, 1967, 1990, 1995a, 1995b). His works are well known among business ethics researchers³ (e.g., Deslandes, 2012a; Dion, 2012; Jørgensen & Boje, 2010; Kerhuel, 1993; Verstraeten, 1998) as well as in the field of entrepreneurship (e.g., Bill et al., 2010; Dey & Steyaert, 2015; Toledano, 2020a, 2020b).

In particular, for the problems addressed in this paper, we find two aspects of Ricoeur's approach to ethics to be appropriate. The first is Ricoeur's (1990/1992, 2002) focus on actions and relationships; we believe that this focus is important because it means a transposition of the attention from abstract ethical levels (e.g., intentions and states of goodness) to changes (e.g., *doing* good and right to someone or something else), which is what characterizes entrepreneurship itself (Anderson et al., 2012; Kuratko, 2011). Moreover, such a focus on relationships allows us to surpass the mainstream ethical theories focused on one specific criterion (e.g., intentions or consequences) to adopt a complementary view that embraces several criteria at the same time (good purposes, right actions, and appropriate decisions in specific contexts). The second is Ricoeur's (1995a, 1995b, 1995c) logic of hyperbolic generosity; we believe that such a logic, grounded on an anthropology of the self as an interpersonal being and responsible agent who can experience life with gratitude, offers a practical guide to identifying the ethics of an action in the context of environmental entrepreneurship. Taken together, these Ricoeurian ideas contribute to developing our comprehension³ of ethics in environmental entrepreneurship by providing a consistent ethical framework that can serve as a guide for discerning ethics in this area.

In the remainder of the paper, we first review what is known and understood about environmental entrepreneurship before examining its ethical endorsement. Then, we introduce Ricoeur's insights and arguments, which we later apply to the environmental entrepreneurship field. In the concluding sections, we highlight the contributions and avenues for further research.

2 | ENVIRONMENTAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND ITS ETHICAL ENDORSEMENT

Although environmental entrepreneurship is taking centre stage as a distinctive area of study, a generally accepted conceptualization is still lacking in the literature (Antolin-Lopez et al., 2019; Piwowar-Sulej et al., 2021). The ambiguity in the concept overlaps with related research areas, such as social and sustainable entrepreneurship, as they all share a drive to ameliorate problems that have been neglected or unsuccessfully addressed (Schaefer et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2011; Vedula et al., 2021). However, there are also elements that distinguish them, including the relative significance of the goals pursued. In social entrepreneurship, for example, the creation of social value is more important than the creation of economic value (Zahra et al., 2009), while sustainable entrepreneurship combines social, economic and environmental goals (Thompson et al., 2011). In these terms, environmental entrepreneurship is distinctive in its focus on the simultaneous creation of environmental and economic value (Lenox & York, 2011; Thompson et al., 2011).

The combination of the ecological and economic logics imbues the term environmental entrepreneurship with promise; it lends itself especially well to descriptions as an ethical variant of entrepreneurship (Gregori et al., 2021; Linnanen, 2010; Markman et al., 2016; Phillips, 2013; York & Venkataraman, 2010). Two ways of espousing the ethicality of environmental entrepreneurship are predominant in the literature and public discourses: one identifies ethics with environmentally friendly activities (e.g., Anderson, 1998), and the other sees ethics as a consistent choice for living by contributing to restoring nature, endorsing it with good intentions (e.g., O'Neil & Gibbs, 2016). In both cases, environmental entrepreneurs become ratified with an ethical identity, albeit with two facets: the general identity referring to activities, identified as “what”, and the distinctive individual identity as “who”, which is illustrative of passionate intentions.

2.1 | “Green activities” as an ethical endorsement of environmental entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial activities associated with the environment are commonly assumed to be ethical themselves (Anderson, 1998; Markman et al., 2016; O'Neil & Gibbs, 2016). The ideal type of environmental entrepreneur is viewed as an individual whose business transforms their sector, making it environmentally friendly

(Isaak, 2010; Schaefer et al., 2015). A well-publicized example is Anita Roddick and the business that she founded, the *Body Shop*,⁴ in which a fair balance between environmental and economic goals (known as a “win-win” situation) is celebrated (e.g., Gibbs, 2009; Isaak, 2010).

Nonetheless, existing research demonstrates that environmental and economic goals and environmental entrepreneurs' values may not always be equally weighted (Antolin-Lopez et al., 2019; Hörisch et al., 2017; Kirkwood & Walton, 2014; Phillips, 2013). Some environmental entrepreneurs, identified by some scholars as “innovative opportunists” (e.g., Walley & Taylor, 2002, p. 39), prioritize profits while sustaining the natural environment (Cohen & Winn, 2007; Jolink & Niesten, 2015). Their economic goals might lead their actions to exploiting opportunities that have a more limited effect on the natural environment but are more profitable than other options (Antolin-Lopez et al., 2019). Indeed, environmental entrepreneurship has been defined as “the process of defining, evaluating, and exploiting economic opportunities that are present in environmentally relevant market failures” (Dean & McMullen, 2007, p. 58). Examples include start-ups that take advantage of market failures to offer renewable energy products that create economic value while progressively contributing to reducing the environmental impact (Cohen & Winn, 2007; Kaesehage et al., 2019).

The opportunistic view also evokes Schumpeter's entrepreneurial concept of “creative destruction” and the innovative role of entrepreneurs (York & Venkataraman, 2010). This is the case, for example, with entrepreneurs developing a new technology that reduces waste generated in the production processes while also possibly damaging traditional industries.

Because being involved in “green activities” is perceived as a “good thing”, entrepreneurs are considered as ethical individuals (Bradley & Ziniel, 2017; Gregori et al., 2021; Vedula et al., 2021) no matter which values they endorse. However, the restrictions imposed by the demands of narrowly conceived opportunistic decisions might raise different controversies in ethical evaluation. In particular, the emphasis on seizing environmental opportunities may open up moral debates about *taking advantage* and the ethical limitations endorsed with self-directed motivations (Anderson & Smith, 2007). Furthermore, a simple association between being “green” and being “good” might be criticized on the ground that activities may have unforeseen negative consequences (Jones et al., 2019; Long et al., 2020) and that it would be a mistake to ignore them even when one is dealing with intrinsically valuable activities. Consider, for example, an environmental entrepreneur who introduces a nano-fertilizer to increase nutrient efficiency, reducing the adverse effects on the environment, but, after some years, contamination is discovered in the bodies of animals and humans, affecting individuals who initially were not taken into account (Zulfiqar et al., 2019).

In sum, giving ethical legitimacy to environmental entrepreneurship based uniquely on the intrinsic value of “green activities” means leaving an ethical story half told. There are also other aspects that are necessary to consider, among them the nobility of intentions

and the values that drive environmental entrepreneurs to become involved in “green activities”.

2.2 | “Having good intentions” as an ethical endorsement of environmental entrepreneurship

The power of environmental ideals and intentions is remarkable in the identification of environmental entrepreneurs as ethical (O'Neil & Gibbs, 2016; O'Neil & Ucbasaran, 2016). The literature emphasizes cases of environmental entrepreneurs who are mainly driven by a strong environmental purpose (e.g., Korsgaard et al., 2016; Silver & Hawkins, 2017; Thompson et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2013). This intensive altruism also recurs in many public discourses and features in entrepreneurs' own narratives (Kaesehage et al., 2019; O'Neil & Gibbs, 2016; Outsios & Kittler, 2018; Phillips, 2013). An example can be found in *Aeropowder*, a UK start-up that produces *plummo*, a thermal packaging material made from waste poultry feathers. The founders describe themselves as passionate entrepreneurs who find their purpose in creating the “products of tomorrow” in a more environmentally conscious manner (Euronews Living, 2020).

There seems to be a general assumption of goodness from these entrepreneurs and their enterprises; environmentalism and heroism become so entrenched with ethics that they are difficult to separate (Blundel et al., 2013; Salmivaara & Kibler, 2020; Silver & Hawkins, 2017). Nevertheless, assuming the ethicality of environmental entrepreneurship premised on the noble ideals and intentions of the entrepreneurs has some limitations. For instance, it might be argued that motivations are not always pure and can change over time (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2008; Lahdesmaki, 2005; Linnanen, 2010; Parry, 2012). Moreover, associating the ethical consideration of environmental entrepreneurship with good intentions must demand at least something about the correspondence between what one tries to achieve and how one sets about it (Lahdesmaki, 2005; Mercier & Deslandes, 2020; Tilley, 1999), that is, some consistency between intentions and actions.

Therefore, there are also weaknesses in assessing environmental entrepreneurship as ethical premised on the entrepreneur's intentions. Assumptions remain in the comprehension of ethics itself, while there is still a lack of clarity to justify when and why environmental entrepreneurship can be considered as ethical. Furthermore, the ethics in use, whether it is associated with intentions or activities, is grounded on an implicit view of ethics as something that emerges unilaterally from environmental entrepreneurs (Hörisch et al., 2017; Linnanen, 2010; Phillips, 2013; Tilley, 1999). In this context, we propose to turn to Paul Ricoeur's ethical thoughts to bring insights to this field. Ricoeur's (1990/1992) approach to ethics allows us to overcome the partial interpretations of ethics that most studies assume by offering an integrative framework that encompasses the teleological—in accordance with the natural search for the good—and deontological dimensions of ethics—in accordance with the moral care for the others—along with the application of critical wisdom in everyday dilemmas. His ethical framework and its application

to the environmental entrepreneurship field will be explained in the remainder of the article.

3 | PAUL RICOEUR'S APPROACH TO ETHICS

Paul Ricoeur wrote widely on the topic of ethics. Although his works do not appear to be directly applicable to the ethics of environmental entrepreneurship, his thesis contains many concepts and ideas that may be extended beyond his original scope to provide the basis for thinking about the set of issues that we want to examine here. In particular, Ricoeur's ethical thought with respect to the moral problem and the logic of hyperbolic generosity embedded in his relational ethics are insightful for our discussion.

3.1 | Ricoeur's ethical thought

Ricoeur's (1990, 1990/1992, 2002) ethical thought is mainly grounded on two anthropological theses. First, the individual is not isolated but lives within the public sphere in relation to others, known or anonymous. Second, human beings are capable but also finite and fragile interdependent selves, which makes them vulnerable in the accomplishment of their tasks and purposes. From these premises, Ricoeur (1990/1992) develops his ethical approach in a three-stage conception of the moral problem: ethics, morality, and practical wisdom.

For Ricoeur (1990/1992), there is a clear primacy of ethics over morality; he does not see ethics reduced to the morality of duty. Grounded on a teleological, Aristotelian view of ethics, Ricoeur (1990/1992, p. 170) regards ethics as "that which is considered to be good" and defines the ethical aim as "seeking the good life, with and for others, in just institutions" (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, p. 172).

Ricoeur's (1990/1992) understanding of ethics arises from action and plunges us into the desire for accomplishment. There is a particular action that plays a crucial role in the Ricoeurian conception of the ethical aim, *solicitude*, which, for Ricoeur, involves mutual care⁵ in a dissymmetrical situation. The departure point at which solicitude occurs is the individual's virtuous actions, that is, the fulfillment of standards of excellence for the self. For instance, assuming an interpretation of the good life as harmony with nature, some virtuous actions may involve the preservation of the natural world. As individuals' good actions are interpreted positively, they develop a sense of worthiness or self-esteem at the ethical level (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, pp. 180–182).

Next, self-esteem extends toward the other, which recognizes the other's esteem for oneself. At this interpersonal level, Ricoeur affirms that one lives "with and for others" such that there is always an "other" implied in the ethical aim of seeking the good life (Ricoeur, 2017/2020, p. 118). It might be an "other" whom one does not necessarily know and whom one only coincidentally meets face to face or many "others" who are anonymously involved in

solicitous relationships through just institutions. An important point for our topic here is that, for Ricoeur, solicitude can reach as far as the protection of the environment (Ricoeur, 1991, as cited in Deslandes, 2012b). Nature can thus be understood as another "other" that requires respect, the degraded situation of which would reflect an unsymmetrical relationship with humans. In this context, solicitude aims at establishing equality to bring a certain justice to dissymmetrical conditions. In fact, Ricoeur (1990/1992) compares solicitude with the Golden Rule—do unto others as you would have them do unto you—with its imperative of the respect that is owed to persons but that could be extended to nature. According to Ricoeur (1990/1992, p. 225), solicitude and the Golden Rule have the same aim: "to establish reciprocity wherever there is a lack of reciprocity".

However, for Ricoeur (1990/1992), ethics still has to pass the test of moral obligation, in which it encounters prohibitions and duties. At this normative level, Ricoeur draws from Kant's morality with maxims of respect for others submitted to the rule of universalization and the Kantian imperative of considering persons as an end in themselves. The ultimate goal is to avoid any kind of dissymmetry in relationships. To attain this goal, Ricoeur (1990/1992, pp. 170–171) establishes a relation between the Aristotelian and the Kantian tradition that implies, in his own words, "a relation involving at once subordination and complementarity". Morality, in Ricoeur's view, is held to constitute a legitimate, and even indispensable, actualization of the ethical aim, albeit with a limited scope, since ethics, for Ricoeur, encompasses morality.

Finally, moving from morality to concrete decision making, Ricoeur (1990/1992) recognizes that duty itself must undergo the test of wise and prudent decision making and appeals to practical wisdom. Because practical wisdom deals with specific situations, it is suited to the grasping of the significant circumstances or consequences of each case (Melé, 2010); it helps to correct possible conflicts that may arise, for example, between the application of the universal rules of morality and the contextual moral values. In these cases, Ricoeur (1995a, 1995b) specifically opts for a "supra-ethics" that involves a logic of hyperbolic generosity encompassing and surpassing the principle of justice.

3.2 | Ricoeur's logic of hyperbolic generosity

The logic of hyperbolic generosity entails a logic of superabundance (Wall, 2005). It has a supra-moral quality in virtue of which it proposes to give out of generosity without the concern for reciprocity that is embedded in the principle of justice and equivalence (Hall, 2007; Wall, 2005). According to Ricoeur (1995a), this generous logic requires an ethical discernment that implies redescribing reality in terms of plenitude, respecting the otherness of others in the most extreme possible way. Using the figurative and poetic discourse of the creation myth in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Ricoeur (1995a, 1995b) explains such a plenitude by taking as a reference the excess of generosity that God shows in the Garden of Eden with his

creative event of giving existence to human beings. The God poetically named in the narrative is the God with whom humans cannot hold reciprocal relations because the gift of existence cannot be returned to the giver; however, it can find expression in an outpouring of life and love that demands nothing in return (Wall, 2001, 2005). In this context, Adam and Eve appear in an idyllic relationship with creation and nature such that nature is treated not as something to exploit but as an object of extreme solicitude, respect, and admiration (Jenkins, 2008).

Ricoeur's hyperbolic generosity thought becomes the practical outpouring of a life and love that see themselves in the light of Adam and Eve's symbol (Wall, 2005). For Ricoeur (1995a, 1995b), the awareness of the gift of existence instigates an ethics in which the self is propelled to pass on this gift of love superabundantly to others, including nature. In this sense, Ricoeur (1967, p. 2333) envisions human beings' caring character before our "deviation" or "going astray", that is, with our original virtuosity, commitment, and capacity to respond to others' demands—including those of nature—with supra-moral care and love that presupposes and surpasses any logic of equivalence.

Nonetheless, Ricoeur (2002, 2007) is aware of our "deviation" and recognizes human fragility to fulfill all purposes as we wish. More precisely, Ricoeur (2007) acknowledges that our good intentions and efforts to respect others are prey to a non-deontological logic of equivalence; thus, we may easily end up calculating the return that our actions will produce for ourselves. Ricoeur (2002, 2007) relates this human fragility to our dependence on context and others as interdependent relational selves but also to our finitude, our limited perspective and bios (our bodies, passions, and desires). In this context, the logic of hyperbolic generosity is Ricoeur's (1995a, 1995b, 2002) suggested response to a corresponding radical deontological incapacity to respect others as it might have originally been derived from solicitous behavior.

4 | RETHINKING THE ETHICS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP THROUGH RICOEUR'S LENS

As noted above, Ricoeur (1990/1992, 1995a, 2002) addresses the whole problematic of ethics as an exploration of ethical capability. His view of the self as a relational self leads him to hold an understanding of ethics that emerges in relationships through a genuine encounter with others (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, 2002). The ethical behavior that he suggests in such encounters involves the logic of hyperbolic generosity (Ricoeur, 1995a, 1995b, 2017/2020). Having examined the distinctive character of this logic, we are now in position to address the questions at the heart of this paper: what is the difference that the Ricoeurian ethical logic offers when it is compared with the ethical perception of environmental logics and what practical role can it play in environmental entrepreneurship?

4.1 | Relationships between Ricoeur's ethical logic and environmental logics as ethical

In Table 1, we offer an overview of the most important differences between the ethical rationales generally associated with environmental entrepreneurship and the Ricoeurian logic of hyperbolic generosity.

Two logics of environmental initiatives become apparent in this typification: opportunistic and passionate entrepreneurs. Opportunistic environmental entrepreneurs are mainly profit driven (Cohen & Winn, 2007; Jolink & Niesten, 2015). They make use of market opportunities in the environmental sector, but they do not hold high ambitious in terms of nature's restoration targets (Antolin-Lopez et al., 2019). Yet, they can still be ethical in their handling and decision-making. In fact, fair transactions characterize the business relationships through which opportunistic environmental entrepreneurs expect to make money (Anderson, 1998; Parry, 2012). Furthermore, because they are involved in environmentally friendly activities, society tends to perceive them as ethical individuals (Bradley & Ziniel, 2017; Gregori et al., 2021; Vedula et al., 2021). However, while there is nothing wrong with undertaking an entrepreneurial activity with the aim of gaining rewards in return, entering exchanges for this purpose may signal an incapacity to respect others fully as an end in itself.

Passionate environmental entrepreneurs, in contrast, are not profit driven; they espouse an environmental logic that draws on and enacts the typical discourse grounded on high environmental ideals (Korsgaard et al., 2016; Silver & Hawkins, 2017; Thompson et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2013). Their business relationships are premised on normative personal commitments associated with contributing to restoring nature, which they value as good and for which they are held to be, somehow, responsible. Because their efforts are linked with their wishes and intentions to make the world a better place, these economic agents have a common ethical perception (Blundel et al., 2013; Salmivaara & Kibler, 2020; Silver & Hawkins, 2017).

However, passionate and opportunistic entrepreneurs share self-oriented behavior (self-interest or self-actualization). Their ethics can be assimilated with the Golden Rule and its classic formula "I give so that I can receive", which is premised upon the self as an autonomous individual separated from others (Ricoeur, 1990). In its most basic form, the Golden Rule asserts that one ought to perform the good for others (or nature) and that the same good is what one would expect to receive for oneself (Ricoeur, 1995c). In other words, there is a logic of exchange based on the expectation that, from this action, there will be a positive consequence for oneself or that the good performed is expected in return.

While the logic of exchange is what makes environmental businesses viable enterprises, the Ricoeurian reasoning would lead us to affirm that a focus on maximizing personal wealth or well-being may lead to conspicuous shortcomings in ethical terms by considering the environmental approach as instrumental. As Ricoeur (1995c)

TABLE 1 Relationships between the Ricoeurian ethical logic and the understanding of environmental entrepreneurial logics as ethical

	Understandings of environmental entrepreneurial logics as ethical		
	Opportunistic view	Passionate view	Ricoeurian ethical view
Logic of environmental entrepreneurs' actions	<i>Profit logic</i> : Environmental entrepreneurship as a way of making money	<i>Environmental idealist logic</i> : Environmental entrepreneurship as a way of fulfilling personal passions/ecological values	<i>Hyperbolic generosity logic</i> : Environmental entrepreneurship as a way of sharing what one has received by caring for nature and others with abundant solicitude
Ethical character of business relationships	<i>Fair transactions</i> : Business relationships based on fair negotiations and effectiveness	<i>Accountability</i> : Business relationships based on normative personal commitments associated with restoring nature	<i>Benevolence</i> : Business relationships based on gratitude, generosity, and an other-oriented disposition
Common perception of the ethics–environmental nexus	<i>Based on (strategic) objectives</i> : Doing things perceived as good by society, such as green activities	<i>Based on intentions</i> : Showing good intentions such as solving environmental problems and making the world a better place	<i>Based on actions (relations)</i> : Doing good by loving and caring for others and nature with abundant solicitude
Foundation of the entrepreneurs' ethical rationality	<i>Self-interest</i> : Maximizing my wealth by satisfying environmental needs	<i>Self-actualization</i> : Maximizing my potential (well-being) by satisfying environmental needs	<i>Others' interest</i> : Maximizing others' interests
Kernel of the ethical action (Golden Rule formula)	I give so that I can receive money	I give so that I can receive happiness and fulfillment	Because it has been given to me, I give
Anthropological view	<i>Innovative opportunist</i> : The self as an individual separated from others	<i>Romantic hero</i> : The self as an individual separated from others	<i>Capable human being</i> : The self as a relational being, who is capable, vulnerable, fragile, and connected to others

recognizes, the complex structure of self-interested behavior, whether self-centred goals, welfare, or choices, prevents us from taking reciprocity in the relationships to be intrinsically important, and, in an instrumental relationship such as that, it might be hard to argue that the person's "real goal" is reciprocity rather than their respective actual goals.

To overcome this instrumental perspective, Ricoeur proposes the logic of hyperbolic generosity. This Ricoeurian logic suggests a kind of relationships (including business relationships) grounded on an abundant generosity based on giving without expectations (Ricoeur 1995a). The reasons that drive people to behave with such generosity are placed outside themselves. As noted earlier, there is a feeling of gratitude in the roots of such behavior that comes from the awareness of having received a gift in an unearned and undeserved way instead of the expectation of receiving a gift (Hall, 2007). Remarkably, this sort of voluntary and hyperbolic generosity constitutes an end in itself, such that it would not be enacted to seize an opportunity for personal gain or due to personal passionate ideals about nature. The ethics–goodness nexus is specifically grounded

on actively *doing* good through benevolent actions, prioritizing the care and concern for the good, well-being, and development of others—included nature—over self-interest (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, 1995a, 1995b).

Comparing the different logics, it becomes clear that the Ricoeurian perspective extends beyond the common ethical endorsement given to the two views of environmental entrepreneurship. Ricoeur's proposal surpasses any individual calculative reasoning that might take place within the environmental logics in favor of an openness toward all forms of otherness that assumes the connectedness of human beings instead of their separation (Ricoeur, 1995a, 1995b). In this sense, Ricoeur articulates a distinctive logic of relating to others. The typical formula of the Golden Rule, "I give so that I can receive...", is replaced by the formula "because it has given to me, I give" (Ricoeur, 1995a, p. 36).

Notwithstanding this replacement in the formula of the Golden Rule, it is important to clarify that the logic of hyperbolic generosity does not replace or contradict the logic of equivalence. In fact, Ricoeur (1995c) recognizes the practicality of the logic of

equivalence embedded in the application of the Golden Rule, yet he warns us that, if it is left to its own, it may be used to support a utilitarian calculation or reactive reciprocity of retribution that perverts the intention of correcting dissymmetry. For this reason, Ricoeur's (1995c) formula retains the principle of justice that characterizes the transactional giving typical of the logic of exchange but reorients it in terms of generosity premised on unconditional giving.

In sum, transposing the Ricoeurian logic to the entrepreneurship field implies recognizing that fair transactions and accountability in business relationships, as they are embedded in "green activities", environmental ideals, and good intentions, can play an important role in a preliminary judgment about the ethics of environmental entrepreneurship; they may act as valid and indispensable ethical constraints. However, what can be gained with Ricoeur's proposal is an extension of what is already available. Ricoeur's (1990/1992, 1995a, 2017/2020) ethical approach allows us to transcend the association of ethics with specific activities or good intentions to consider the abundant solicitude and generosity with which environmental entrepreneurs may act in each relationship. This comprehensive approach, in turn, may facilitate the implementation of Ricoeur's ethics in environmental entrepreneurship and heighten its practical implications.

4.2 | Applications and implications of the Ricoeurian ethical logic for environmental entrepreneurship

Ricoeur's (1990/1992, 1995a, 2017/2020) ethics and logic of hyperbolic generosity bring a distinctive trait to the ethics of environmental entrepreneurship through an other-oriented disposition and a normative standard that can be used to judge ethics in relational actions: to give without any expectations. An example of the Ricoeurian ethics in practice happens in Phyco-Genetics, a European academic spin-off that offers solutions for efficient genetic engineering of microalgae. This company shares knowledge and performs favors for businesses and researchers seeking advice (Phyco Genetics, 2020). Ricoeur's (1990/1992, 1995a) ethics in practice can also take place through environmental entrepreneurs assisting their employees in professional and personal growth, for instance listening to them and helping them to solve problems. Alternatively, a Ricoeurian logic of hyperbolic generosity might be integrated by introducing a motive of compassion—which often arises in times of crisis—into business codes (Mercier & Deslandes, 2020) or through the role model of the environmental entrepreneur.

Despite the fact that the application of Ricoeur's ethics does not guarantee a "concrete result" beyond the active action of doing good itself, it may bring important benefits to the environmental business. According to Ricoeur (2017/2020), indeed, the idea of unconditional giving, instead of transactional giving, reveals concrete ways to promote important human qualities. Thus, acting under a logic of hyperbolic generosity may promote good habits and altruistic values that, little by little, may help to introduce changes into the business culture, inspiring a spirit of generosity and benevolence

and enhancing the relationships of solicitude, mutual trust, contribution, and commitment that enable environmental businesses to thrive. In fact, benevolent giving is considered to be constitutive of meaningful personal relationships (Deslandes, 2012b; Hall, 2007; Mercier & Deslandes, 2020), which can in turn help people to grow in confidence and responsibility to become involved in productive collaborations and propose more creative solutions to environmental problems, positively improving the environmental enterprise's effectiveness and efficiency. Thus, a Ricoeurian perspective might also enhance environmental entrepreneurs' ability to articulate their tough environmental mission compellingly, helping to manage or reduce their vulnerability and to improve the long-term health of the environmental business.

However, the Ricoeurian ethics is not inexorable and its application to the environmental entrepreneurship field may encounter some difficulties. For example, it may be argued that, even though the logic of hyperbolic generosity can serve environmental entrepreneurs through the knowledge that they should show benevolence to others, doubts might emerge concerning the appropriate amount of generosity to put into their relationships or for whom they should care more when there are conflicts of interests among those who demand something from them. Human vulnerability and fragility, although they can be reduced, cannot be eliminated. Moral conflicts and confrontations might emerge in business life even when applying a Ricoeurian approach. Nonetheless, the logic of hyperbolic generosity may also enable forgiveness (Ricoeur, 2017/2020) and, therefore, the recovery of trust might be easier in these difficult situations.

5 | CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

There is a general perception of environmental entrepreneurship as an ethical variant of entrepreneurial activity (Gregori et al., 2021; Linnanen, 2010; Markman et al., 2016; Phillips, 2013; York & Venkataraman, 2010). However, we have argued that this assumption is flawed since it is merely grounded on a generic ethical assessment of activities or entrepreneurs' intentions to restore nature (Anderson, 1998; Markman et al., 2016; O'Neil & Gibbs, 2016; O'Neil & Ucbasaran, 2016). Moreover, the understanding of ethics is implicit and assumed rather than explained (Gregori et al., 2021; Linnanen, 2010; Phillips, 2013; Salmivaara & Kibler, 2020; Tilley, 1999). In light of this, we have claimed the need for a comprehensive ethical approach that can be applied to this area and serve as a guide to knowing when and why we might speak about environmental entrepreneurs and environmental entrepreneuring (Anderson, 1998) being ethical. This article has tried to respond to this need by offering a distinctive ethical reasoning based on Ricoeur's (1990/1992, 1995a, 1995b) ethical thought and his logic of hyperbolic generosity. We have argued that this logic is intelligible in its own right and responds to broader ethical concerns than those endorsed in the current ethical perceptions of environmental

entrepreneurship. Moreover, we hold that the logic of hyperbolic generosity is relevant to value the ethicality of environmental entrepreneurs and important for environmental businesses to thrive as it can help to create a virtuous circle by opening spaces for ongoing relationships of trust that stress generous actions.

In this context, we contribute a modest advance in theorizing about environmental entrepreneurship and appropriate ethics. In particular, Ricoeur's (1990/1992) main contribution to the ethics of environmental entrepreneurship lies in the provision of a relational ethics synthesizing teleological, quasi-deontological, and the establishment of a relationship between the need for wisdom and discernment and the advice of acting out of gratitude with superabundant generosity. Ricoeur's (1990/1992, 1995a) approach to ethics has thus given us ground to develop new ways of thinking about certain ethical aspects to apply in the environmental entrepreneurship field. More specifically, building on his work, we have proposed a practical ethical guide for helping entrepreneurs in their decisions making and provided an explicit ethical framework to avoid the problems that can arise from the ethical assumption of environmental entrepreneurship. Our Ricoeurian framework has stressed that environmental entrepreneurship rather than being ethical by definition, can be ethical, or not, depending on the practices of care in which environmental entrepreneurs engage with others and with nature.

However, some challenges may appear. As we noted above, the application of Ricoeur's (1990/1992, 1995a) ethical approach may involve some difficulties; it suggests a different language such that its application might require the opening up of a different discourse on ethics. In this sense, we acknowledge that much work is needed. Our aim here has been to highlight the possibility of enriching the understanding of ethics within the area of environmental entrepreneurship; our contribution is offered not as a fully developed framework but rather as a step in its continued development. We also recognize that other ethical frameworks, such as the stakeholder theory (e.g., Egels-Zandén & Sandberg, 2010; Fassin et al., 2017; Hatami & Firoozi, 2019; Spence et al., 2000; York et al., 2016), care ethics (e.g., Deslandes, 2012a; Noddings, 2012; Sama et al., 2004), and practical wisdom (e.g., Bachmann et al., 2018, Melé, 2010; Melé & González Cantón, 2014), might also be used to provide insights into this field. In fact, they might complement the Ricoeurian approach on which we have focused in this work, but, due to the limitations in the scope of this paper, we have had to omit them. Nonetheless, this limitation offers promising avenues for future research; in particular, future works might opt to take these approaches as a departure point and complete the initial step that we have provided using Ricoeur's (1990/1992, 1995a, 1995b) ethical thought.

Further qualitative studies might also investigate the value of Ricoeur's (1990/1992) ethics for business performance and reputation. In addition, we may have opened up issues for enquiry in the recent entrepreneurial literature that favors everyday prosaic practices (Welter et al., 2017) and questions, for instance, how well Ricoeur's (1990/1992, 1995a) arguments fit and provide guidance. Studies that consider Ricoeur's ethics in the context of different categories of environmental businesses or that focus on firms created

by multiple founders may also result in an interesting discussion. In fact, future research may take teams as a departure point and focus on the collective aspect of responsibility. It might also be interesting to analyze the political dimension of ethics in this field, reaching beyond a discussion of whether (and how) environmental entrepreneurs act ethically in their relationships and considering whether (and how) these acts become good for the world in which they live. In this manner, we might progressively advance our knowledge of how environmental entrepreneurs' ethical practices may contribute toward turning the earth into a renewed Garden of Eden.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

PEER REVIEW

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

ORCID

Nuria Toledano  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7346-6205>

ENDNOTES

¹ Scholars have used a broad range of terminology to refer to entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs whose activities are associated with the natural environment. The main idea embedded in environmental entrepreneurship is also referred to in the literature as, for example, eco-entrepreneurship (e.g., Mars & Lounsbury, 2009), or green entrepreneurship (e.g., O'Neil & Gibbs, 2016). Environmental entrepreneurs have also been called ecopreneurs (e.g., Isaak, 2010) or green entrepreneurs (e.g., Walley & Taylor, 2002), among other names. In this paper, we consider these terms to be synonymous; to avoid any confusion, we use *environmental entrepreneurship* and *environmental entrepreneurs* consistently throughout; these terms are widely used within entrepreneurship research (for further details, see Antolin-Lopez et al., 2019). However, in line with Anderson's (1998) approach, we use the term *environmental entrepreneuring* when we engage with the processual side (Hjorth, 2014; Steyaert, 2007).

² Paul Ricoeur, as a philosopher, is identified as a "hermeneutical phenomenologist" (Wallace, 2002, p. 80). As a hermeneut, Ricoeur's understanding of selfhood is based on the awareness that the subject enters consciousness that has already been formed by the symbolic systems within the culture and communal heritage; as a phenomenologist, Ricoeur suspends any judgment about the reality status of the imaginary claims made by one's orienting textual sources. He widely uses biblical texts to provide imaginary variations on the theme

of ethics and the good life and is identified by some as a theological thinker (for further details, see, e.g., Wallace, 2002).

³ Although it is beyond the scope of this article to describe and discuss fully the previous research on Ricoeur as it is applied to business ethics and management, it is worth noting that, within these fields, researchers who take an interest in Ricoeur's work mainly focus on his analysis of narrative processes—especially those concerning identity—and metaphorical language. Readers who are interested in these works may find it stimulating to consult, in addition to the authors already mentioned, Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010), and Koning and Waistell (2012) or earlier references such as Cunningham (1998) and Hayagreeva Rao and Pasmore (1989).

⁴ The Body Shop was created by Anita Roddick in Brighton, UK, in 1976. Roddick is recognized as having been a vocal critic of ethical malpractices in the cosmetics industry. Her multiple fair-trade agreements across the globe and her efforts to empower tribesmen and their rights over the products that they grow are emphasized; her entrepreneurial practices are used as examples in the fields of social, sustainable, and environmental entrepreneurship (see, for instance, Gibbs, 2009; Isaak, 2010; Kirkwood & Walton, 2014), even though there might also be some critics about the sale of the Body Shop to a multinational (Kwakye, 2021).

⁵ Although there are overlapping interests between Ricoeurian thinking and care ethics, such as the commitment to the relationship between justice and care, for many care ethicists, Ricoeur is outside care ethics. For further details, see, for instance, Van Nistelrooij et al. (2014) and the collection of articles included in the Special Issue, "Ricoeur and the ethics of care", published in November 2014 in *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 17(4).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Nuria Toledano is Associate Professor of Business Management and Entrepreneurship at the University of Huelva, Spain. She has published in international journals in the area of business, entrepreneurship, and ethics, including *Business Horizons*, *Journal of Business Ethics* or *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*. Her current interests concern business ethics, theology, entrepreneurship education, environmental and social entrepreneurship.

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