Relating to Nature
Motivation, Hermeneutics and Spirituality

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An Iconic-Liturgical Perspective on the Experience of Nature: Assessment of its Hermeneutical and Motivational-Ethical Potential

*religious studies / ethics*

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core articles for this presentation


overview

- the challenge of the value-action gap
- relating to nature
- the spiritual/religious in nature experience and environmentalism
- spirituality and meaning
- environmental ethics and the experiential
The challenge of the “value-action gap”


Nationwide (n=1664) Canadian survey

- few situational barriers
- 72% of respondents: gap between intentions and actions

UNEP, Task Force on Sustainable Lifestyles Progress Report, 2010

‘Overcoming this gap needs more than information and raising awareness. People need to be engaged, enabled and encouraged to change their behavior’

empirical studies?
  motivational environmental eco-
  psychology
Emotion and motivation

Research in neuroscience & motivational psychology


• not clear how emotions intervene in *moral judgement*
• **motivating moral action** probably most important


studies of moral agency of patients with mental disorders (psychopathy, sociopathy):
• emotion not necessary for possessing moral *knowledge*.
• but critical to ‘provide a *motivational basis* for engaging in behaviors that exemplify moral norms.’

→ environmental value-action gap: *emotional aspect crucial key?*
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relating to nature

Research in environmental psychology and ecopsychology


- affectively engaged experience of nature

- connectedness to nature (CN)

= strongly predictive of pro-environmental behaviour


- exposure to nature: emotionally beneficial

→ effect appears mediated by increasing CN
relating to nature

Link between **childhood experience** and **connection to nature**
well documented (e.g. Joy A. PALMER et al. 1999; Müller et al. 2009)

- positive connection develops at early stage, remains fairly stable afterwards
- importance of
  - silent side of experience *(CHAWLA 1999)*: receptivity
  - experiential learning vs. more classical forms of nature education:
    emotional engagement with an *other*

participative experiences >> domesticated forms (planting, caring)
→ pro-environmental behaviour
relating to nature

Affectively connecting to nature at later stages in life?

potential barriers
- rational (scientific, economic) thought-frames: utilitarian > engaging
- availability of nature as other in (sub-)urban environments (BE, NL,...)

but:


‘Places that a person can rely on for restorative experiences are thus more likely to be places for which attachments develop over time and that in turn come to figure in place identity.’

‘place identity, place attachment, and restorative experiences can be viewed as nested and reciprocally influential’
relating to nature and self / identity

“Environmental selving”

• encounter(s) with nature
• knowledge by acquaintance (Bonnett, 2007)
• connectedness / commitment to nature
• inclusion of nature in concept of self / identity (cf. interpersonal relationship)
• internalization of environmental attitudes and norms
• tension between competing identities (social, environmental,...)  
  → e.g. mobility paradox
• integration of identities, with environmental identity as salient part

takes time
no linear process
self-reinforcing dynamical cycle(s) ?
relating to nature and meaning

All of the previous processes: markedly hermeneutical in nature
(e.g. David Utsler 2007, 2014; Nathan M. Bell 2014)

How we **understand** ourselves **in connection/relation to** nature
shapes our **behaviour toward** nature

all forms of environmental identity are at root hermeneutical
commitment to nature

what drives life-long commitment to the cause of nature?


• informal childhood experiences
• emotional access (*emotionaler Zugang*) to nature


Environmentalist figureheads: Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, David Suzuki:

• significant life experiences with *cognitive, emotional* and *spiritual* aspects
• interpretation of these experiences → profound choices / commitments
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spirituality and nature experience

**spirituality vs. religion**
personal quest vs. participating in tradition?

spiritual
- existential / ultimate meaning
- interconnection
- “transcendence”
- universally experienced (cross-cultural)

Hill & Pargament 2003; Hood et al. 1996
spirituality and nature experience

Empirical studies in psychology


• spiritual experiences: in natural >> human-built environment
• outspoken desire to protect such natural environments


profound encounter with nature

+ 

nature spirituality

→ synergistically enhance sense of environmental responsibility
spirituality and nature experience

Empirical studies in psychology


Empirical support for:

• positive association between connectedness to nature (CN) and spirituality
• spirituality mediates between CN and well-being
spiritual/religious and environmentalism?

spiritual-religious language in environmental statements/charter

‘The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.’

Earth Charter Commission

- initiated by UN
- global civil society consultation process

? nature/earth religiosity

Bron Taylor, Bronislaw Szerszynski, Tarjei Rønnow, Thomas Dunlap,...
environmentalism

• well-rooted in natural sciences
• spiritual/religious aspects?
  o nature as place of singular (ultimate) meaning
  o “reverence,” “sacrality”

the “Cronon-incident”


‘wilderness serves as the unexamined foundation on which so many of the quasi-religious values of modern environmentalism rest.’

‘the romantic ideology of wilderness leaves precisely nowhere for human beings actually to make their living from the land.’


‘Had I been writing about Judaism or Christianity or Islam or Buddhism, or about the spiritual universes of native peoples in North America and elsewhere, I would almost certainly have been more careful to show my respect... The reason I did not do so in this case is that the religion I was critiquing is my own’
“religion” revisited

Etymology of *religio*

- **re-** *ligare*: to bond again, to re-connect
  (Lactantius, Augustine *De Vera Religione* & *Retractiones*,
  Thomas Aquinas *Contra Impugnantes*)
  
  → notions of **reconnection**, **relation**

- **re-** *legere*: to read again, to reconsider (precaution)
  (Cicero, Augustine *De Vera Religione* and *re-eligere* [re-*e*-legere]:
  to choose again, to recover (Augustine *De Civitate Dei*)
  (↔ neglegerere): aspects of care and attentiveness

  → notions of **lecture/interpretation**, **knowledge**, **commitment**
“religion” revisited

Integrating all these meanings: Thomas Aquinas (ST)

Orientation toward the divine (‘ordinem ad Deum’)

- affects
- directs
- orders

~ combination of interpretation / relation / commitment
→ transformative
environmentalism and religion?

*legere* - aspect

- knowledge / meaning of nature apart from scientific insights
- ‘by acquaintance’
- something beyond the material

cf. Transcendentalists (North America, 19th C.)
“ultimate, spiritual meaning” in nature highly influential on 20th C. environmentalism
excursus: transcendence in nature

vertical / horizontal

(U. Goodenough)

overwhelming / participative

No experience of dualism immanence ↔ transcendence in nature

William Desmond: metaxu (“between”)

‘in relation to what is beyond itself in being in relation to itself.’

intimation of the transcendent

in the overdetermined givenness of being
excursus: transcendence in nature

Case study: transcendence in forest environments

Two modes of transcendence:
- “deep flow”: familiarity and belonging ~ horizontal
- “diminutive”: sense of awe, humility ~ vertical
environmentalism and religion?

*legere* – aspect

*e-legere*: choice, care


- transformative experiences (epochal or gradual) → life-long commitment
- importance of meaning for formation / enduring of commitment
- “being called upon” ~ hermeneutical-ethical
environmentalism and religion?

**ligare** – aspect

connectedness to nature (CN) ~ pro-environmental behaviour

sense of “place”

- participation, not mere observation
- relationship between people and between the natural habitat and human beings

George Sessions: adequate ‘God-nature-man relationship’ necessary to address the ecological challenges

Szerszynski and Tomalin: environmental activism holding spiritualities stressing the interconnectedness of the divine, human and natural
environmentalism and religion?

**legere** (meaning, choice)

&

**ligare** (connection, affectivity)

aspects

mutually reinforcing

**life-orientation** (*ordo*)

→ motivating

interesting lens to help understand what *drives* environmentalist engagement
environmentalism and religion

environmental movement ≠ a religion (!)

spiritual / religious aspects within environmentalism

• *ad intra*
• less easily *ad extra*
  • credibility loss
  • policy processes: economic-scientific discourse dominant
  • historically laden concept
    (cf. Lynn White’s *The Historical Roots...*)

acknowledging these aspects could aid environmentalism in

• better articulating own core tenets & convictions
• understanding its own motivational drive
• facilitating dialogue / collaboration between religions and environmentalism
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**spirituality / religiosity and meaning**


"Meaning in life" mediates association between

- nature connectedness and well-being
- *religiousness* and well-being
  
  * spending time in private religious reflection.

**recall:**


spirituality mediates association between CN and well-being
spirituality / religiosity and meaning


- respondents: “meaningful” and “spiritual” often associated / interchanged


- spirituality: touches the dimension of meaning and purpose
- [respondent]: it is about ‘knowing who you are, and understanding your place in the world, and desiring to fulfill it the best way you can’
spirituality / religiosity and meaning

But:

often difficult for respondents to articulate spiritual component of experience

• “ineffability”
• no familiar language register

→ experience needs to be put into words in order to be interpreted

  o not only describing and representing
  o but shaping and uncovering meaning

? challenge for / contribution from religious studies (& theology)

(van Tongeren, 1994)
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ethics and the experiential

• clearer ethical **awareness** when being in nature than in conceiving of nature (Frederickson and Johnson 2000)

• experience adds an affective emphasis important in order to **motivate** application of environmental (ethics) knowledge (Goralnik et al. 2012)
environmental ethics and hermeneutics

current environmental ethics: aware of limitations

from a philosophical (environmental) ethics
to an
(environmental) hermeneutics of ethical experience?
(van Tongeren, *Ethics and the Limits of Hermeneutics*, 2011)

• starting from the way in which we experience ethical life
• psychological and social insights on practices and motives
• no reduction of the plurality of ethical experience
• ethical theories: only partial interpretations of (different aspects of) ethical experience
• ethical theory → (critical) ethical reflection
environmental ethics and hermeneutics

‘ethical concern does not arise in some pure form of the kind that can adequately be articulated in sets of universal abstract principles. Rather it is the case that our antecedent involvement in a place (and therefore the world) conditions all understanding, including the ethical.’

(Bonnett 2012, 295)
environmental ethics and hermeneutics

what is ethical / moral experience?

‘Experience is being approached in a way that asks for an answer and that sets the process of interpretation in motion.’ (van Tongeren, 1994)

→ requires openness to what breaks through our expectations (~ spirituality)
→ that which addresses us, has moral meaning and calls us to a response - praxis (normative character)

humans as **beings that can be brought to action by meaning**
environmental ethics and hermeneutics

hermeneutical ethics
- collect and arrange experiences
- put into words
- clarify conditions in which understanding takes place

aims
- enabling to see what presents itself as full of moral meaning
- not aimed at problem solving ("applied ethics") or activism
- unravelling the root of the problem
  → understanding present condition & preventing future problems

= “ethics of patience”
concluding

Hermeneutics involved in processes relating to
• human connectedness to nature
• motivating pro-environmental behaviour

Need for dialogue (collaborative research) between:
• environmental psychology / ecopsychology
• philosophical hermeneutics
• religious studies / theology
• environmental ethics
• environmental education

Acknowledging and exploring the spiritual aspect of nature experience and the experiential interweaving of immanence and transcendence
• metaxu (W. Desmond)
• nature as iconic
• liturgical experience of nature and ethics
thank you