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Relating to Nature

Motivation, Hermeneutics and Spirituality

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ongoing project (2014-2017)

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

religious studies / ethics

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Centre for Metaphysics and Philosophy of Culture

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core articles for this presentation

Francis Van den Noortgaete and Johan De Tavernier, *Affected By Nature: A Hermeneutical Transformation of Environmental Ethics*, in *Zygon* 49 (2014) 572–592.

Francis Van den Noortgaete and Johan De Tavernier, *Legere-Ligare: An Interpretive Key to the Environmentalist Experience of Nature*, in *Louvain Studies* 38 (2014) 55-75.



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”

Emily HUDDART KENNEDY, Thomas M. BECKLEY, Bonita L. MCFARLANE, and Solange NADEAU, *Why We Don't “Walk the Talk”: Understanding the Environmental Values/Behavior Gap in Canada*, in *Human Ecology Review* 16 (2009) 151-160.

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

Bryce HUEBNER, Susan DWYER, and Marc HAUSER, *The Role of Emotion in Moral Psychology*, in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 13 (2009) 1-6.

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

Lisa DAMM, *Emotions and Moral Agency*, in *Philosophical Explorations* 13 (2010) 275-292

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

F. Stephan MAYER and Cynthia MCPHERSON FRANTZ, *The Connectedness to Nature Scale: A Measure of Individuals' Feeling in Community with Nature*, in *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 24 (2004) 503–515

affectively engaged experience of nature



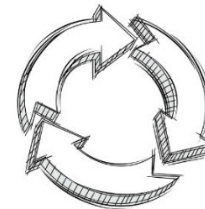
connectedness to nature (CN)

= strongly predictive of pro-environmental behaviour

F. Stephan MAYER, Cynthia MCPHERSON FRANTZ, Emma BRUEHLMAN-SENECAL, and Kyffin DOLLIVER, *Why is Nature Beneficial? The Role of Connectedness to Nature*, in *Environment and Behavior* 41 (2009) 607–643

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:

Kalevi M. KORPELA, Yerry HARTIG, Florian G. KAISER and Urs FUHRER, *Restorative Experience and Self-Regulation in Favorite Places*, in *Environment and Behavior* 33 (2001) 572-589.

'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”

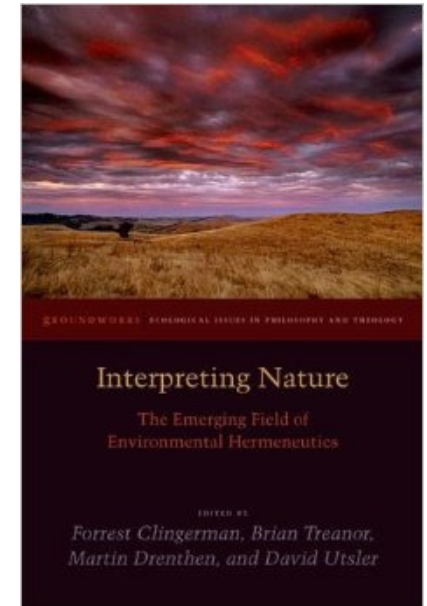
- encounter(s) with nature
- knowledge by acquaintance (Bonnett, 2007)
- connectedness / commitment to nature
- inclusion of nature in concept of self / identity (cf. interpersonal relationship)
- internalization of environmental attitudes and norms
- tension between competing identities (social, environmental,...)
→ 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

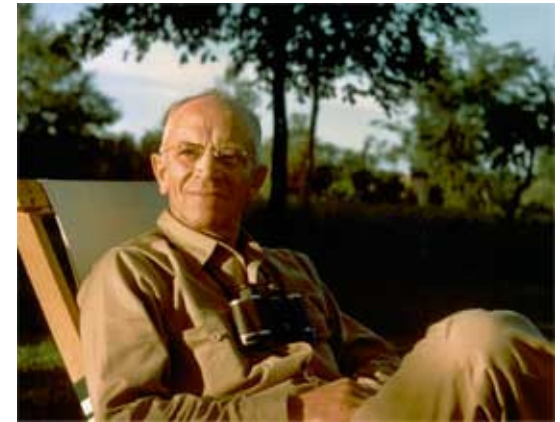
All of the previous processes: markedly hermeneutical in nature
(e.g. David Utsler 2007, 2014; Nathan M. Bell 2014)



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?

Swantje EIGNER and Peter SCHMUCK, *Biographische Interviews mit Umwelt- und Naturschützern*, in *Umweltpsychologie* 2 (1998) 42–53.

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

Pierre WALTER, *Dead Wolves, Dead Birds, and Dead Trees: Catalysts for Transformative Learning in the Making of Scientist-Environmentalists*, in *Adult Education Quarterly* 63 (2013) 24–42.

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

- significant life experiences with **cognitive**, **emotional** and **spiritual** aspects
- interpretation of these experiences → profound choices / commitments

overview

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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

Tristan L. SNELL and Janette G. SIMMONDS, *“Being in that Environment Can Be Very Therapeutic”: Spiritual Experiences in Nature*, in *Ecopsychology* 4/4 (2012) 326-335.

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

Annick HEDLUND-DE WITT, *Pathways to Environmental Responsibility: A Qualitative Exploration of the Spiritual Dimension of Nature Experience*, in *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 7/2 (2013) 154-186.

profound encounter with nature

+

nature spirituality

→ synergistically enhance sense of environmental responsibility

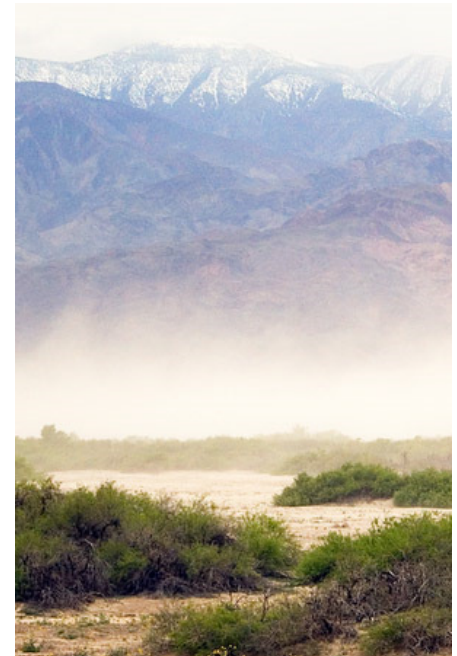
spirituality and nature experience

Empirical studies in psychology

Jasmine L. TRIGWELL et al., *Nature Connectedness and Eudaimonic Well-Being: Spirituality as Potential Mediator*, *Ecopsychology* 6/4 (Dec. 2014) 241-251.

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/charters

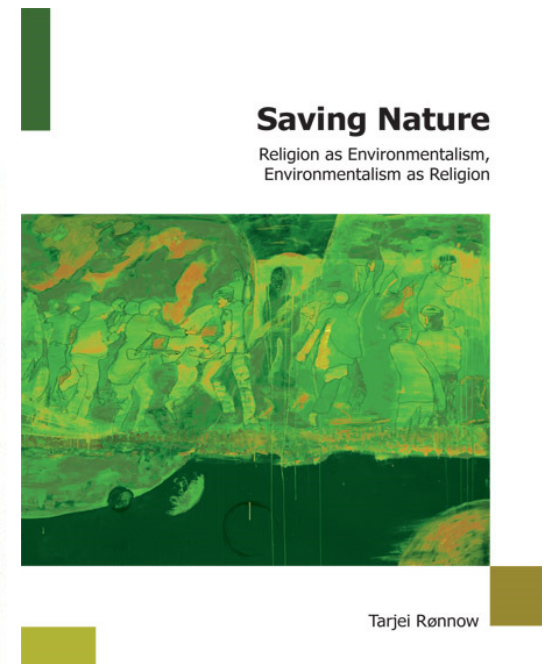
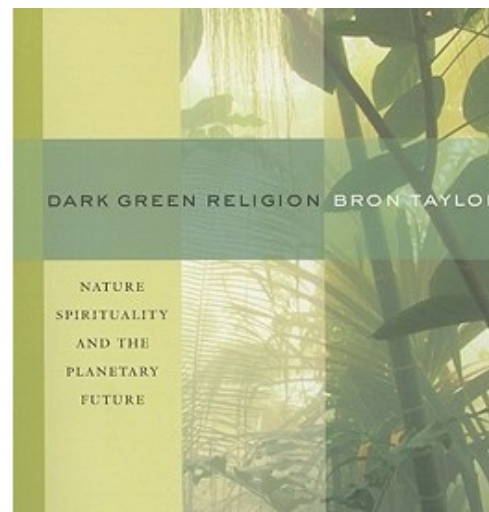
'The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.'

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?
 - nature as place of singular (ultimate) meaning
 - “reverence,” “sacrality”



the “Cronon-incident”

William Cronon, *The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*, in William Cronon (ed.) *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995, 69-90.

‘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.’

William Cronon, *The Trouble with Wilderness: A Response*, in *Environmental History* 1/1 (1996) 47-55.

‘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

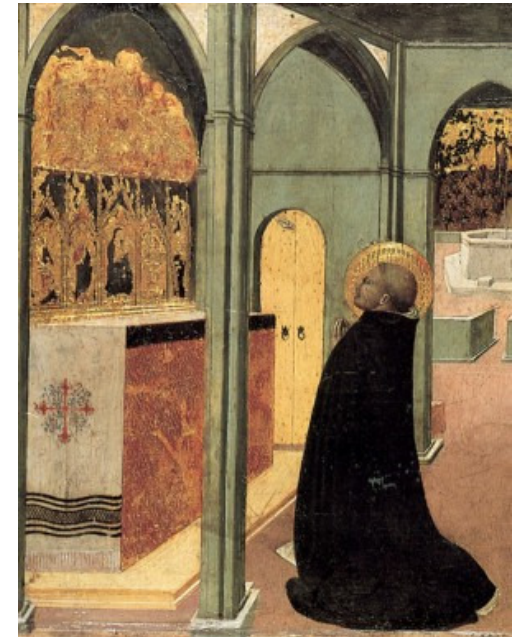
Integrating all these meanings: Thomas Aquinas (*ST*)

Orientation toward the divine (*ordinem ad Deum*)

- affects
 - directs
 - orders
- } life

~ combination of interpretation / relation / commitment

→ transformative

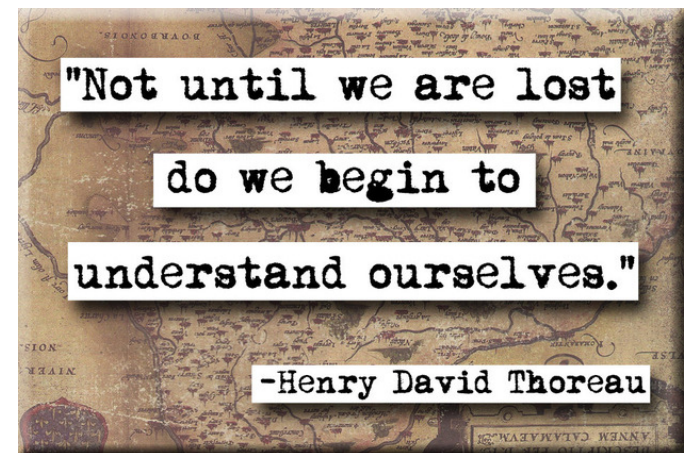


environmentalism and religion?

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

Kathryn WILLIAMS and David HARVEY, *Transcendent Experience in Forest Environments*, in *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 21 (2001) 249-260.

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

Jessica T. KOVAN and John M. DIRKX, *"Being called awake": The role of transformative learning in the lives of environmental activists*, in *Adult Education Quarterly* 53 (2003) 99-118.

Pierre WALTER, *Dead Wolves, Dead Birds, and Dead Trees: Catalysts for Transformative Learning in the Making of Scientist-Environmentalists*, in *Adult Education Quarterly* 63 (2013) 24–42.

- 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

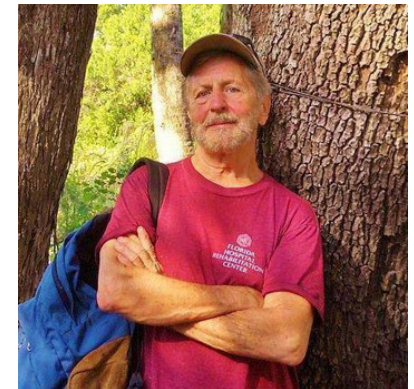
sense of “place”

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

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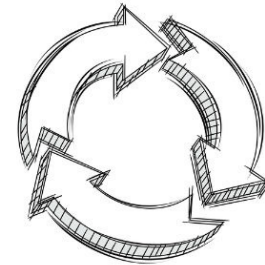
George Sessions: adequate ‘God-nature-man relationship’ necessary to address the ecological challenges

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



environmentalism and religion?

legere (meaning, choice)
&
ligere (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



overview

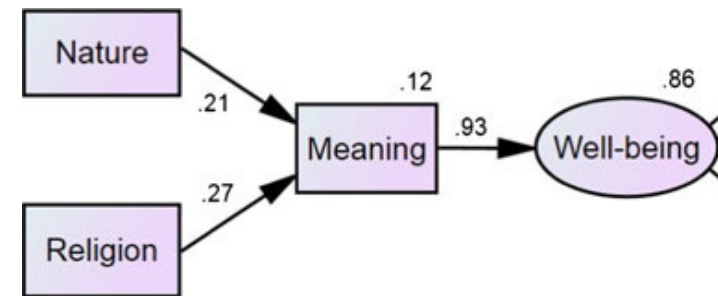
- the challenge of the value-action gap
- relating to nature
- the spiritual/religious in nature experience and environmentalism
- **spirituality and meaning**
- environmental ethics and the experiential

spirituality / religiosity and meaning

Andrew J. HOWELL, Holli-Anne PASSMORE, Karen BURO, *Meaning in Nature: Meaning in Life as a Mediator of the Relationship Between Nature Connectedness and Well-Being*, in *Journal of Happiness Studies* 14 (2013) 1681–1696.

“Meaning in life” mediates association between

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



recall:

Jasmine L. TRIGWELL et al., *Nature Connectedness and Eudaimonic Well-Being: Spirituality as Potential Mediator*, *Ecopsychology* 6/4 (Dec. 2014) 241-251.

spirituality mediates association between CN and well-being

spirituality / religiosity and meaning

Laura M. FREDRICKSON and Dorothy H. ANDERSON, *A Qualitative Exploration of the Wilderness Experience as a Source of Spiritual Inspiration*, in *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 19 (1999) 21-39.

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

Pathways to Environmental Responsibility: A Qualitative Exploration of the Spiritual Dimension of Nature Experience, in *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 7/2 (2013) 154-186.

- 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

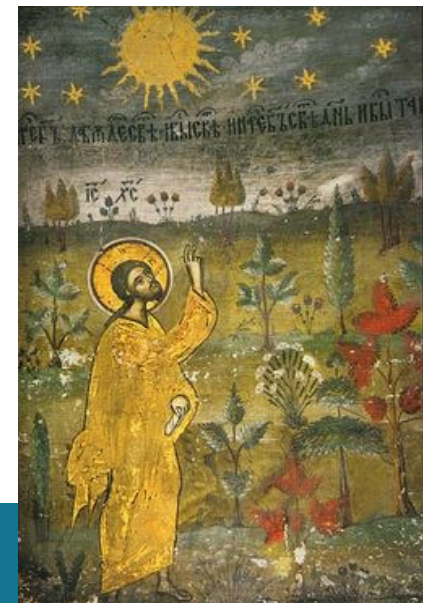
- “ineffability”
- no familiar language register

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

(van Tongeren, 1994)

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

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



overview

- the challenge of the value-action gap
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- spirituality and meaning
- **environmental ethics and the experiential**

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)



RETRIEVING NATURE
Education for a
Post-Humanist Age

Michael Bonnett

KU LEUVEN

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”

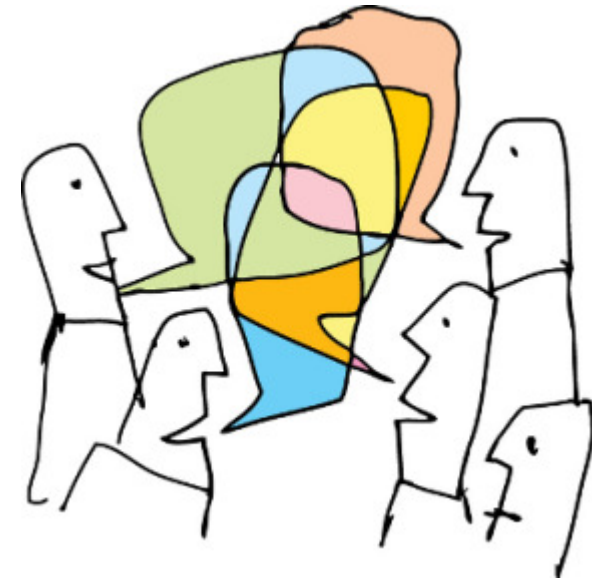
concluding

Hermeneutics involved in processes relating to

- human connectedness to nature
- motivating pro-environmental behaviour

Need for **dialogue** (collaborative research) between:

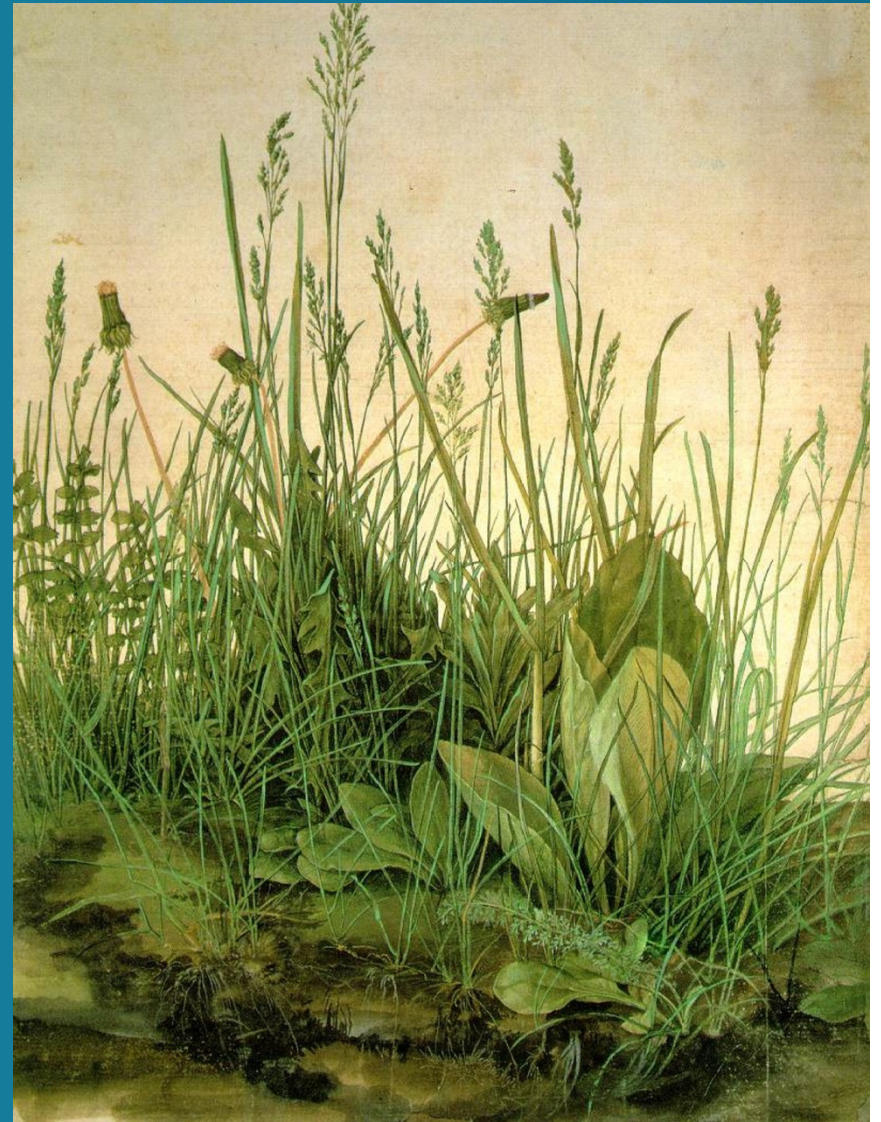
- environmental psychology / ecopsychology
- philosophical hermeneutics
- religious studies / theology
- environmental ethics
- environmental education



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



Albrecht Dürer, *Das Große Rasenstück* (Vienna: Albertina)