

## Ecology, Eco-phenomenology, and the Immanent Ethics of Nature

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### Abstract

Like ecology, eco-phenomenology – a branch of environmental ethics claiming that the so-called “natural values” emerge spontaneously in our experience and seeking to draw ethical implications from this – tries to deal with the ecological crisis. However, the question still remains – even after almost 40 years of eco-phenomenology – in what sense a *phenomenological* ethics of nature is possible and what are these natural values. The article attempts to respond to these questions against the background of contemporary (eco-)phenomenology. Although it is still true that Husserl’s *Lebenswelt* is the source of all values, including those of nature, Husserl’s descriptions of the lifeworld must be replaced by more dynamic descriptions of contemporary phenomenology in France, which focuses on the “event feature” of appearing (*événementialité de l’apparaître*). The possibility of a phenomenological ethics of nature then seems to lie in what Deleuze sums up with the slogan: “to be worthy of the event”.

**Keywords:** eco-phenomenology, French phenomenology, environmental ethics, Gilles Deleuze, environmental crisis, natural values, transcendence, event

### 1. Introduction: ecology and ecological philosophy

When thinking about possible solutions to the current environmental crisis, we first and foremost turn to the greatest authority in this field – to ecology, i.e., an exact empirical science, part of biology, which studies the relationships between

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organisms and their environment. Ecology was first defined in the work of E. Haeckel, *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (Haeckel 1866), but its greatest development is associated with the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the rise of environmentalism as a broader social movement, newly awakened by an awareness of the need to protect nature and the environment, which human activity has begun to burden disproportionately. One of the pioneers of environmentalism was Rachel Carson, whose book *Silent Spring* (Carson 1962) describes the blindness of humanity, whose sole aim has become to increase agricultural yields without questioning the environmental impact of ever-newer and more drastic pesticides, herbicides, and insecticides, as well as intensive farming in general. Sixty years after the publication of her famous book, the situation has worsened in many ways. Ecologists speak of a huge catastrophe, not only the pollution of air, water, soil, and the bodies of various organisms with a variety of chemicals, but also the mass extinction of plant and animal species, the ozone hole, and global warming with the associated desertification, rising ocean levels, and mass migration. But they do not just stop at describing the problem based on “hard data”, e.g. on exact measurements of the amount of this or that substance in the bodies of organisms or in the atmosphere – they also offer precisely calculated predictions and solutions, which form the basis for concrete practical steps in the fight against the environmental crisis. For example, since it is now indisputable that human activity is behind global warming – as confirmed by the 2021 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,<sup>1</sup> which is based on thousands of scientific studies – almost all countries in the world agreed at the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference in Paris to try to radically reduce greenhouse gas emissions in order to keep the average temperature rise on the planet below 1.5°C compared to the pre-industrial era.<sup>2</sup>

Ecology’s contribution thus seems unquestionable, and yet this science still struggles to put its proposed solutions into practice, both at the level of individual and social responsibility for the environment.<sup>3</sup> The problem lies partly in the fact that the political establishment – which, alongside its various

ideologies, listens to its electorate and its concerns about the threat of deteriorating living standards – is still hesitant to take major steps and only willing to make significant compromises. What is worth noting here, in terms of the purpose of this article, is that this raises a whole new set of questions that go beyond the borders of ecology. And it is here that the space for other sciences, but also for ecological philosophy and eco-phenomenology opens up, a space for complementing objective knowledge that brings ecological philosophy to the forefront of addressing the environmental crisis. The aim of this introduction is not to define in detail the relations between ecology, ecological philosophy and eco-phenomenology, but to outline the field of eco-phenomenology and within it the main problems of this article. Some of the new questions, situated beyond the scope of ecological science, undoubtedly touch on human subjectivity, at least on how humans deal with objective (ecological) data and why they do so (in the name of what ideas or values). This realization lies behind Naess' famous distinction between the shallow ecology movement and the deep ecology movement: while the former technically addresses pollution or resource depletion (Naess 2017a, 218), the latter deals with the more complex causes of the ecological crisis, which includes the study of deeper human attitudes towards ecological issues: deep ecology “is supposed to suggest explication of fundamental presuppositions of valuation as well as of facts and hypotheses” (Naess 2017b, 222). As Evernden and after him Toadvine similarly suggest, despite the urgency of ecological issues, we should not consider them only as technological problems to solve, but instead what we need is thinking, deeper questioning exploring the attitudes and assumptions that lead us to label something as a (technological) problem, and even foreshadow how to solve it (Evernden 1999, xi-xii; Toadvine 2001, 73). To put it another way, such deep assumptions determine how we understand nature, our role in relation to it, or how we will act towards it. And it is precisely the absence of this scrutiny, says Evernden, that is behind the failure of ecological environmentalism as a movement striving for protecting nature and the environment in the 1970s: ecologists as experts in solving this or that ecological problem –

whose reputation was greatly enhanced by the aforementioned Carson's book – became part of the “management of the Earth”, which is primarily concerned with the general welfare and standard of *human* living (Evernden 1999, 8-9), which may be in line with the welfare of non-human beings, but often is *not*.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the only sustainable strategy of environmentalism, he argues, must be to defend the intrinsic value of nature (independent on human interests), a value that is, however, absent from the official description of reality in which nature is primarily a useful resource (Evernden 1999, 13, 22-26). Therefore, he proposes that we redraw the map of reality, and that our actions be guided by a new one. In other words, our actions should be determined not by our beliefs about ourselves (planet managers) and what nature is (useful resource), but by what we actually encounter as nature – by our experience of nature free of all assumptions (Evernden 1999, 34). It is clear that phenomenology should play a major role in this, which Evernden illustrates mainly with Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty. Around the same time, E. Kohák takes the next step and undertakes his own original analyses of the “moral sense of nature”.<sup>5</sup> Like most eco-phenomenologists, he rejects – puts into brackets – all previous theses, theories, assumptions, and presuppositions, including the naturalistic conception of nature, shared also by the empirical sciences and some other branches of environmental ethics, in which nature is understood as an extended matter governed by natural laws of causality.<sup>6</sup> The problem with this approach is that nature has no value in itself, it is just a material machine describable mathematically whose meaning is derived from the personal preferences of this or that person (Kohák 2000, 67; Brown 2003, 7). In contrast to this Kohák's eco-phenomenology remains a phenomenology and as such focuses on a pure description of how nature itself and the “natural values” or “moral sense of nature” appear immediately in our experience, trying to show, in line with the intentions of environmental ethics, why the more-than-human world<sup>7</sup> and its beings should be treated with a reverence and respect previously reserved only for humans (Kohák 1987, 212-213; cf. Kohák 2000, 2).

The crucial question, however, still is – despite the development of eco-phenomenology after Evernden and Kohák – what these “natural values” are. Indeed, isn’t value an economical concept referring to the exchange value of things and coming from the natural attitude that phenomenology must put into brackets? In what sense, then, do values grow out of phenomena? And in what sense is it possible to construct a *phenomenological* ethics of nature? Does it even make sense to speak of a phenomenological ethics if phenomenology is primarily a descriptive and not a normative discipline? To begin to respond to these central questions – whose answers go obviously beyond the scope of just one article – against the background of contemporary phenomenology, I will try to outline a phenomenological ethics of sensible nature based on Deleuze’s idea of immanent ethics, in which two hitherto rather disparate currents of contemporary phenomenology, based mainly (but not only) on the work of Merleau-Ponty, intersect: the American eco-phenomenology of sensible nature (Abram, Toadvine) and the French process phenomenology, which puts transcendence (of nature) at the centre of appearing (Maldiney, Richir, Marion, Barbaras, Romano).<sup>8</sup> The aim of this article is of course not to discuss all three sources of inspiration in detail, but to update the questions raised above *in the context of contemporary phenomenology*. Although it is still true, in phenomenology, that Husserl’s *Lebenswelt* is the source of all values,<sup>9</sup> including those of nature thematized in eco-phenomenology, Husserl’s descriptions of the lifeworld must be replaced by the even more dynamic descriptions of contemporary phenomenology in France, which focuses on the “event feature” of appearing (*événementialité de l’apparaître*). The possibility of a phenomenological ethics of nature then seems to lie in what Deleuze sums up with the slogan: “to be worthy of the event” (of nature). In what follows, I will thus describe the very basis of all the discussions on natural values, which is the experience of transcendent sensible nature giving itself as an event, which makes it an autonomous actor deserving of ethical treatment. In other words, it is the experience of respect for the otherness of nature around us that compels philosophy to extend ethics to non-human actors.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. An immanent ethics of the events – a phenomenological one?

The second section of this paper will begin with a short presentation of the Deleuzian immanent ethics of the event, which, as it seems to me, is an appropriate model for a phenomenological ethics of nature. Deleuze's transcendental empiricism – a thesis of pluralism of being that rejects pre-existent transcendental forms that would distribute our experience in the same way and make it into a repetition of the same – naturally extends into ethics, to be distinguished from morality telling us in advance what to do on the basis of some transcendental principles (e.g. Kant's categorical imperative). (cf., e.g., Deleuze 1995, 100-101; Deleuze 1998, 134-135). Since we ceaselessly become other, ethics cannot be a matter of pre-given principles, rules or values, but must instead relate to that which shakes them incessantly, i.e. the virtual or always singular becoming of our existence. It follows that rather than the Kantian question for the universal good (what should I do?), we should ask in Spinozian or Nietzschean terms: what can I do now? What am I now capable of? (cf. Smith 2011, 124-125; Smith 2013, 1242-1250). We should be, as Deleuze puts it, "worthy of the event" (Deleuze 1990, 149-150) for it is the event that brings us new existential possibilities for creating new forms of life. Being worthy of the event involves 1) the liberation of the event as such, i.e. beyond its spatiotemporal actualization (which Deleuze names "contra-actualization" of the event (Deleuze 1990, 150), and which is approximately equivalent to the phenomenological *ἐποχή*); 2) the necessity to represent the event at the level of empirical facts, to incorporate one of the new possibilities brought by it into the state of things (Deleuze 1990, 146-147; Deleuze 1995, 176). Deleuze and Guattari give a concrete example in their common text devoted to the pure event of May 68: The crisis experienced by the protesters after their failure is directly proportional to the failure to create the new welfare state they fought for, the new state of things based on the event of May 68 (Deleuze, Guattari 2006, 234-236).

But here one must ask at least three basic questions: 1) Is such ethics a *phenomenological* one? 2) Is not Deleuzian

ethics based on a metaphysical account of what “event” is? 3) And is “event” an appropriate term to describe (natural) phenomena? As for the first question, such a formulation of ethics may indeed appear at first glance to contradict phenomenology as a “descriptive science”: phenomenology does not prescribe, it only describes. But Deleuzian immanent ethics does as much: it is not a matter of a prescription of action on the basis of transcendental principles, but a philosophical clarification of reality as it is unproblematically given to us in everyday life (the level of actualized events in Deleuze, the world of natural attitude in Husserl). In other words, *the core of the ethics of the event is the ontological priority of one (phenomenological, dynamic) description of our existence over another (that of the natural attitude, or, everyday perception of the world)*, which is entirely consistent with Husserl’s idea of the phenomenological foundation of human empirical practice including that of sciences (cf. Husserl 1970, 340-341; Husserl 1981, 33). The core of the event ethics is not the necessity of some action (an event forces me to act in some way), but rather the possibility of being in accord with “real experience” of the world in its becoming, which in Deleuze leads to maximizing the power to act. This does not mean that the event completely loses any ethical force, i.e. the force that should compel the actor to act ethically. This power grows out of that ontological priority, and the author who has described it best in phenomenology was Levinas. He is the author of a descriptive ethics in which the encounter with an external singular being is at stake,<sup>11</sup> the encounter whose ethical force arises from the disruption of the Same, and not – similarly to Deleuze – from some general principles of morality. Listening to the other (and not interpret him according to commonly shared meanings), is the only possible response to the encounter with his “true transcendence”, which manifests itself in his “teaching”. For Levinas, this acceptance of the other ultimately results in a plurality of human society in which “one is responsible for oneself and for the Other” (Levinas 1979, 213). The essential difference between Levinas and what I will claim here is that this transcendence of the Other is only one example of an encounter with true transcendence that can also be attributed

to sensible nature (cf., e.g., Maldiney 1991, 315). The plural community or collective of which Levinas speaks would thus involve both human and non-human beings.<sup>12</sup>

And to respond to the second and third questions: contemporary French phenomenology seems to be an actualization of de Beistegui's (Deleuzian) idea of a phenomenology of difference that would be a phenomenology of becoming (de Beistegui 2000, 68). Of course, there are still some important differences between the Deleuzian and phenomenological "empiricism". David Abram summarizes the most important one when considering Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of becoming-animal: "As a phenomenologist, I am far too taken with lived experience – with the felt encounter between our sensate body and the animate earth – to suit his [Deleuze's] philosophical taste. As a metaphysician, Deleuze is far too given to the production of abstract concepts to suit mine." (Abram 2010, 10) In short, while phenomenology tries to stay very close to pre-scientific evidence of phenomena, however ephemeral they may be, situated on the boundaries of intentional phenomenology, Deleuze does not limit himself to *human* experience, and expresses himself in a post-structuralist or metaphysical language enriched (especially during his collaboration with Guattari) by that of various exact or human sciences. Nonetheless, these differences should not obscure the striking systematic proximity between Deleuze and contemporary French phenomenology. What is sometimes called "new French phenomenology" (Tengelyi 2012; Simmons, Bensons 2013) – i.e. phenomenology in France after the first reception of Husserl and Heidegger, approximately from 1960 onwards<sup>13</sup> – constructs its plane of immanence similarly to Deleuze: the "plane of thought" of contemporary French phenomenology is, as it were, immersed in the Deleuzian plane by shifting the centre of the appearing from the subjectivity (Husserl, early Heidegger) to the other pole of the phenomenological correlation, i.e. to the transcendence that a) gives itself (as an event) and thus fully explains what appears to consciousness or to the first subjective pole of the correlation (Marion's phenomenology of givenness, or Barbaras' archi-movement of the world), and/or b) escapes and thus triggers the



unstoppable movement of the phenomenon as nothing but phenomenon (Richir).

However, by speaking of a new role of *transcendence*, are we not closing off the path toward the possibility of a phenomenological *immanent* ethics? Of course not. It is just the opposite: Only thanks to the new role of what in phenomenology appears as transcendence, only thanks to the openness of subjectivity to a transcendence irreducible to the transcendence of the constituted world (Husserl) or to the transcendence of the projection (early Heidegger), can we move within phenomenology onto the plane of *radical* immanence, to the plane of ontological becoming, which is broader than *subjective* immanence, and therefore open to other, non-human beings. In other words, the plane of thought of contemporary French phenomenology is that of immanence established by a radicalized *ἐποχή* (in comparison to that of Husserl), whose residue is not the Husserlian immanence, i.e. the absolute immanent being of lived experiences as opposed to the merely relative being of transcendence, but both together, the whole phenomenal field whose essential characteristic is that it is – in Patočka's words – “asubjective”.

One of the consequences of such radicalization is that contemporary French phenomenology is able to follow Deleuze and investigate the *real* (=virtual, pre-intentional, asubjective) conditions of intentional (actual) experience. To give a few examples: Marion explores the “infinite finitude” (*infinie finitude*) of the subjectivity (Marion 2016, 186), extending phenomenality to include saturated phenomena as the most real in our ordinary experience (saturated phenomena are free of everything that could limit their appearing, especially of all the conditions of *any possible* experience, and thus denote phenomena in their uniqueness); Richir, within his genetic phenomenology, describes the phenomenological field as a field of “concretenesses growing together” (*concrétudes en concrecence*) (Richir 2014, 32), always singular pre-intentional schemes of affectivity that constitute the real condition of intentional consciousness; or Romano, following Maldiney's investigations of the event, in his early work tries to overcome Heidegger and think being-in-the-world on the basis of the

event as always singular or real condition of its understanding (Romano 1998, 31-34).

Returning now to the possibility of an eco-phenomenological ethics inspired by Deleuze's ethics of the event, one must note that this radicalization of phenomenology, consisting in the exploration of the role of transcendence in the "constitution" of phenomena, reveals a radical phenomenological immanence that is nothing other than human being within sensible nature, and that it is here that the issue of immanent ethics intersects with that of eco-phenomenology. This needs to be explained in greater detail. As Toadvine writes, there are two contradictory conceptions of the human-nature relationship with which environmentalism works: 1) humans are not exceptional, they are part of nature; 2) humans are at the same time separated from nature, alienated, the most obvious consequence of which is the ecological crisis. Hence the paradox: how can we be part of nature and at the same time act against it? (Toadvine 2017b, 181-182) The specific phenomenological solution to this paradox relies on an analysis of our experience of nature: humans are part of nature, but also separate themselves from it through their (specific) bodies. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in *The Visible and the Invisible*, the seeing or, more generally, the perceiving subject must also be perceptible, it perceives precisely because it is a body that can itself be perceived (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 134 *sq.*). But it is exactly this materiality of the body, its situatedness within the material world, its thickness or depth, that makes any perception of the world only perspectival and therefore unable to grasp the entire depth of the perceived. Thus, the beginning of human alienation from nature is nothing but this situatedness of the human body as a "blind spot" (Toadvine 2017b, 195), which correlates with the notion of nature as transcendence.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, an immanent phenomenological ethics of nature would be an ethics of human being within sensible nature, an ethics of the relationship between humans and nature in which humans emerge within nature and can grasp it (or interact with it by means of perception, knowledge or action) *without ever reducing its transcendence*. It is this

transcendence that makes nature appear to contemporary phenomenologists as an event.

### 3. Nature as an event in a threefold sense

The followers of Merleau-Ponty (who, as everyone knows, did not complete his project of the ontology of the flesh due to his untimely death), whether those who have developed his ideas in American eco-phenomenology (mainly T. Toadvine or D. Abram in *Becoming Animal*) or those belonging to contemporary French (processual) phenomenology (H. Maldiney, M. Richir or R. Barbaras), describe how such transcendence manifests itself phenomenologically. One can distinguish at least three fundamental modes in which it appears, which consequently form modes on which an eco-phenomenological immanent ethics of (being worthy of) nature (as an event) can be built. In other words, nature appears as an event in a threefold sense:

1) Nature escapes or resists human control by its very material being. For example, according to Maldiney, it is the very material body of things, e.g. the body of a mountain, that gives itself as an event in the sense that it makes itself present only through the infinity of its perspectives, or rather it transcends all perspectives given in our experience, and therefore it has no identity, it is not an object, but the transcendent background of all our sensations in which it always makes itself newly available (Maldiney 1973, 223-226, 230). According to Abram or Kohák, it is this “mere existence” (Abram 2010, 49) that deserves human respect, it is enough just to be, there is no need for it to be of any use to us (Kohák 1987, 95-96). This does not mean that the material body of non-human beings is merely a passive mass of resistance. Abram rightly affirms that the mountain *lives* in the sense of actively defining the mood of the whole place, gathering other beings in its shadow or interacting with the senses of the walker who adapts his stride to the slope of the mountain terrain (Abram 2010, 47-49). Matter as such of the mountain is an activity calling out and gesturing towards others, as well as organizing the space around it (Abram 2010, 47-49). Similarly, Barbaras says that the stone inhabits the

world in its own way: by condensing it within itself, and thus going beyond its own extended visible mass – like those high places on hills or mountains that let the earth communicate with the sky, as if the whole world has crystallized into a single point within them (Barbaras 2019, 31-35). According to both Abram and Barbaras, such *gathering* of the world around the bodies (of non-human beings) is a primitive form of consciousness or intelligence that forms the basis for specifically human consciousness. Both can even be credited with the thesis that human consciousness or awareness is only a part of the awareness of nature: the basis of human consciousness is the creativity of the living perceiving body, which evolved in the process of evolution within nature, and whose conscious contents consist of nothing but the consequences of the encounter between the human body and the body of the Earth.<sup>15</sup>

This all sounds quite trivial, for we all know that material nature is that which is itself at least indifferent to human intentions or resists them, which testifies to its independence. But how many times do we treat a mountain or a forest on its slope as if it were not there at all, as if seeing only ski slopes from the onset? This and similar cases show that in our natural attitude we forget the otherness of nature, and therefore it is the task of phenomenologists to recall it. However, this short analysis of transcendence of both animate and inanimate material beings and things, including artificial ones, i.e. their pure material existence, seems to be insufficient for an immanent phenomenological ethics of nature since it is obviously characterized by more than its materiality.

2) Nature resists human control and calls for our respect insofar as it is spontaneous being in the sense of Greek *φύσις*, i.e. the living being bringing itself into presence on its own initiative (cf. Zimmerman 2003, 82). Nature is understood as the world in its phenomenological sense, i.e. the context of our lives which retains its transcendence. In Toadvine's words: the world is the clear context and background of our everyday lives, the connective tissue of things and events that gives them meaning, but which is part of a larger nature that is connected to the obscure and uncontrollable (Toadvine 2017b, 194). And

this uncontrollable is proving to be alive. As pointed out in another text by Toadvine (with reference to Merleau-Ponty), the living material body of nature, encompassing our own living bodies, forms the so-called elemental immemorial past that we carry within us and yet do not completely control – we cannot fully consciously experience, for example, the biological aspect of our bodies involving such organic rhythms as the heartbeat (Toadvine 2014b, 274-277). The elemental is the source of a “productivity which is not ours, although we can use it – that is, an originary productivity that continues [to operate] beneath the artificial creations of man” (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 125, quoted by Toadvine 2021, 135). In other words, everything elemental encountered by us is an expression of an interiority that is not our own, but which belongs to nature. As the early Patočka points out, such interiority is an expression of the broader movement of nature in which we merely participate (Patočka 2014, 94, 99). The elemental constitutes what might be called “pure nature,” or, according to Merleau-Ponty, wild animal being that circulates in and around us (Toadvine 2021, 135).

3) Finally, nature can defy humans by appearing as a major revolutionary event, as a natural catastrophe whose spontaneity as *φύσις* often becomes violent with regard to humans. Levinas writes about the uncertainty and danger of life within the elements (Levinas 1979, 137) and Maldiney and Romano thematize such natural catastrophes as events that shatter both our individual and social lives. It is only in such existential crisis, says Maldiney, that the existent, struck by his impotence, “suddenly experiences his unjustification, that of a finite being that can only understand itself in its relation to a foundation that it ignores, and whose finitude can only be maintained through the intermediary of a transcendence in which it is immersed” (Maldiney 2001, 91).<sup>16</sup> It is the dark side of the Openness of appearing that gives rise to the event in which the Nothingness of absolute transcendence (the non-being of nature) passes into being, in the form of a natural disaster, for example (Maldiney 2001, 106-109; Maldiney 2012, 204).

As Maldiney and Romano as well as Deleuze and Guattari put it, the only possible way to be worthy of such event, to solve such an existential crisis coming from nature's insurmountable transcendence is to change or to transform ourselves and to understand the world and our own place in it anew, i.e. according to the new existential possibilities brought by the event (Maldiney 1991, 320; Romano 1998, 200-201). The ecological crisis seems to be *the* event of all events: it manifests the transcendence of nature by showing us the far-reaching tragic consequences of human actions that have not respected other minor events and signs of nature's otherness. The only sustainable strategy with regard to all the events, including that of the ecological crisis, is to forget the dream of becoming "masters and possessors of nature" and to start respecting it as at least an equal partner, i.e. to start listening to what it tells us. Of course, what this exactly means is a large complex question. The unpredictability of events does not relieve us of the responsibility to calculate, plan, anticipate, and devise responses to all sorts of potential threats, but we must also accept that the future cannot be built on calculations and that there are clear limits to our planning (Toadvine 2017c, 227-230; Abram, Hine 2011, 7). At the very least, we should expect that our calculations may be wrong and that there must be sufficient room for correction. If we were to commit to a complete revolution, which has already begun in several countries such as Bolivia and Ecuador in the field of the rights of nature, it would mean placing the being of nature (materially autonomous and creative being of *φύσις*) on the level of humans. This does not mean, of course, that it should have all the rights that humans have: non-human beings should have rights corresponding to their being and capabilities, so not, for example, the right to express themselves freely (animals or rivers do not speak), but the right to be represented by any human being in court if their "mere existence" is threatened, as is already case in Ecuador. In any case, it is necessary to develop our sensitivity to the transcendence of a more-than-human nature and the related flexibility of the whole society that would be able to cope with crisis situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic. In this regard, it is no coincidence that the

concept of resilient society, defined by these very attributes, is now being promulgated across many exact and non-exact scientific disciplines, including ecology (cf., e.g., Ungar 2021).

#### 4. Conclusion

The goal of the present article has been to outline a phenomenological ethics of nature that could play an important role in the burning issue of the environmental crisis. To this end, it has first discussed the specific role of eco-phenomenology in relation to ecology: 1) it puts into brackets all the prejudices on which human conceptions of nature and their relationship to it may stand; 2) it does not restrict itself to reasons and argumentation but considers the “natural values” as emerging immediately before us. The fundamental questions were what these natural values are and in what sense a phenomenological ethics of nature is possible. To begin to answer them against the background of contemporary phenomenology, the article proposed a phenomenological ethics of sensible nature based on Deleuzian immanent ethics, in which the element of all “natural values” is nature appearing within the world of our life (*Lebenswelt*) where no one doubts its value. The first step of eco-phenomenological ethics of nature is not a specific enumeration of the values of nature, but the definition of the original field in which all discussions of values can take place: the “natural values” of eco-phenomenology are not at first clearly defined values that can be measured against each other or against other values – eco-phenomenology puts into brackets all values in order to discover their source, which is their lived experience, of which the relationship to the more-than-human nature is a part. Here nature is not only distant scientific data or predictions based on it, but an admirable spontaneity (*phusis*) that permeates life all around us, including our own bodies. More precisely, nature appears as a transcendent event in at least three basic ways: a) through its merely material existence; b) through its spontaneity or productivity (*φύσις*); and c) through catastrophic events reconfiguring human existential possibilities. The ethics summed up by the slogan “to be worthy of the event of nature” can take many forms, from leaving enough room for corrections in our calculations to the

protection of animals or to the formulation of the rights of nature, but its cornerstone is the conviction that nature in the sense of *φύσις* is an autonomous and creative force that must be treated in accordance with its own transcendent being.

To conclude, I would like to point out the limits not only of the preceding considerations, but of phenomenological analyses of the ecological crisis in general. If phenomenology is right and there are “natural values” or “moral sense of nature” immediately appearing in our experience of nature, we should now ask as follows: What happens, for example, between our emotional response to the suffering of male chickens in the egg industry and our purchase, the very next day, of eggs from mass production of the egg industry at our local supermarket? What happens between our sympathy for the sinking islands in the Pacific Ocean, and our continued engagement in driving cars, flying, and other activities that produce unsustainable amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere? These questions indicate that the ecological crisis is much deeper than might meet the phenomenological eye: not only are we often indifferent to the reasons why we should heed the warnings of ecologists, we might even become indifferent to our own (phenomenological) experience of suffering of other human or non-human beings. Phenomenology is not completely helpless in the face of such questions: together with Husserl or Richir, it can speak of a crisis of the phenomenological sense, which is overlaid by symbolic thinking that tries to define it and identify it, which results in an eclipse of natural values under layers of different symbolic interpretations, such as the ideology of consumerism that homogenizes our experience and choices by forcing us to choose from pre-given options.<sup>17</sup> It is true that “phenomenologically” we are still able to decide freely and put all symbols aside, but only few people are able to do so. This means that for a thorough philosophical analysis of the environmental crisis, a phenomenological analysis will not suffice – it will have to consider other non-phenomenological factors, such as the power and specific functioning of this or that symbol, such as the aforementioned ideology of consumerism.



Despite these limits, eco-phenomenology is not useless: whatever obscures natural values, such as natural respect for nature's otherness, the task of all sustainable solutions to the environmental crisis seems to be to rediscover them, to rediscover what has always been inherent in us – sensitivity in relation to more-than-human nature. If Gérald Hess is right, and the task of environmental ethics is to combine the eco-phenomenological realm of lived experience (as a basis of values), rational justification (critical discussion of values, including the aforementioned issues that go beyond eco-phenomenology), and political engagement (Hess 2018, 108), then the contribution of eco-phenomenology is its cornerstone. Even if people did not discuss the value of nature at all, even if they lived in socio-economic systems that suppress or at least obscure these values, the world of our lives would remain an area of permanent possibility of revolution, in which nature appears as an autonomous partner of humans, forcing us to discuss its ethical value and engage politically on its behalf.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The paragraph A.1 of the Panel's sixth assessment report, which began publication in August 2021, says: "It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land. Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred." (Masson-Delmotte et al. 2021, 4)

<sup>2</sup> This is the temperature threshold at which irreversible climate change will be triggered, with far-reaching impacts on the lives of all kinds of organisms, including humans.

<sup>3</sup> It is now clear that some countries and private companies are not honouring their commitments from the Paris conference. In response to the release of the above-quoted report, the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, said the following: "We are on a fast track to climate disaster: Major cities under water. Unprecedented heatwaves. Terrifying storms. Widespread water shortages. The extinction of a million species of plants and animals. This is not fiction or exaggeration. It is what science tells us will result from our current energy policies. We are on a pathway to global warming of more than double the 1.5-degree limit agreed in Paris. Some government and business leaders are saying one thing – but doing another. Simply put, they are lying. And the results will be catastrophic." (United Nations 2022)

<sup>4</sup> Kohák similarly describes this attitude as the "posture of mastery" (cf. Kohák 2000, 68) which grew out of the Cartesian dream of becoming "masters and possessors of nature" (Descartes 2006, 50) or the biblical "fill the earth,

subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all living things” (*Genesis* 1:28). Even this attitude, which has largely contributed to the ecological crisis, can lead to the formulation of an environmental ethics: mastery over nature can be combined with responsibility and care for it. What is problematic about such care, however, is that it still – after all the discoveries of evolutionary biologists and others, and after all the democratic revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – presupposes the exceptional position of humans among the other beings of this planet. It is here – also according to Evernden – that the main reason for the failure of environmentalism is found: the prioritization of human interests over the interests of nature.

<sup>5</sup> A term coined by Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars, A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature*. It was this book published in 1984, and also Neil Evernden’s *The Natural Alien* (1985), that probably began the history of eco-phenomenology. This history is, of course, preceded by various phenomenological investigations of nature or natural phenomena, but not explicitly linked to the theme of the ecological crisis.

<sup>6</sup> According to Toadvine, eco-phenomenology defines itself in opposition to naturalism, placing itself outside the mainstream of environmental ethics (Toadvine 2017a, 176). However, some authors, e.g. D. Wood, seek to bring eco-phenomenology and naturalism closer together (see Wood 2001, 78-95).

<sup>7</sup> Term coined by David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous, Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (Abram 1997).

<sup>8</sup> While Deleuze’s philosophy and especially his and Guattari’s notion of becoming-animal have already attracted attention in eco-phenomenology (cf., e.g., Abram 2011 or Toadvine 2014a), the opposite is the case with contemporary French phenomenology and the phenomenological notion of the event which is only slowly beginning to enter into eco-phenomenological discussions (see, e.g., Gilliland 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Recall that Husserl addressed this question repeatedly, for example in his recurrent reflections on phenomenology as the first philosophy or the phenomenological foundation of the sciences (including ecology) which is explicitly addressed in the third volume of his *Ideen* (see Husserl 1980; cf., e.g., Kohák 1987, 22-26; Kohák 2003, 20).

<sup>10</sup> This is certainly not the only possible kind of eco-phenomenological ethics. A different kind of ethics might, for example, be based not on the autonomy of nature, on its independence from us, but on what we share with it, i.e. on the fact that we are sensually related to it, that it is the source of the satisfaction of our basic needs, that we live from it, etc. An example of such ethics might be David Abram’s eco-phenomenology of sensuous kinship with nature in *The Spell of the Sensuous*. In contrast to this type of ethics, this article will attempt to outline an ethics of nature based on its transcendence, i.e. on that which escapes all bodily intentions, that which far transcends our bodily communication with the familiar faces of things, and transforms human subjectivity into an insatiable desire for nature. This conception of subjectivity as desire is shared by many contemporary phenomenological thinkers such as Richir, Barbaras or Toadvine (cf. Richir 2010; Barbaras 2008, 2011; Toadvine 2003) Any other foundation of ethics seems to be

directly undermining such ethics by converting – to put it in Levinas’ terms – the Other into the Same. If an ethics of nature is not to be left to the contingency of the good will of the human subject (Benso 2000, xxxviii), it must stand firmly on the respect for nature’s otherness, on its transcendence or resistance to human reason.

<sup>11</sup> “Moral consciousness is not an experience of values, but an access to external being.” (Levinas 1990, 293)

<sup>12</sup> Let us add here that some of the Levinasian interpreters similarly attempt to attribute a face to non-human beings (see, for example, Benso 2000; Diehm 2003).

<sup>13</sup> It is Janicaud who situates new French phenomenology around this period (Janicaud 2000, 16–17).

<sup>14</sup> It needs to be added that the whole extent of human alienation from nature is linked not only to the human body as a body, but to its species-specificity. As the main features of the human body involved in the specifically human form of experience, one can mention e.g. bipedia, neoteny, or the unspecialized hand (cf., e.g., Barbaras 2011, 170-173). As for the specificity of human mind, it needs to be said that beginning with Husserl, phenomenology deals with the essences of the human mind, including the temporality of consciousness with its retentions and protentions, associations, *habiti*, language, abstract or symbolic thought, etc.

<sup>15</sup> Abram states this explicitly (Abram 2010, chap. Mind); Barbaras develops a theory according to which the human body, as the site of consciousness, is born in a so-called *archi-event* of the deflagration (*archi-événement de la déflagration*) in which the world disintegrates into the multiplicity of beings, with part of its power passing to them, which is the fundamental source of their movement of phenomenalization – of their becoming-conscious (Barbaras 2019, 72-73).

<sup>16</sup> “[L’existent] éprouve soudain son injustification, celle d’un être fini qui ne peut se comprendre que dans son rapport à un fondement qu’il ignore, et dont la finitude ne peut s’entretenir que de l’intermédiaire d’une transcendance dans laquelle elle s’abîme.”

<sup>17</sup> Richir sees the reason not only for the environmental crisis but for the general crisis of humanity in the fact that what he calls “symbolic institution” (*institution symbolique*) overlaps the self-generation of the phenomenological sense (*sens se faisant*) (cf., e.g., Richir 1990). The institution is called “symbolic” because it is the symbol that integrates heterogeneous parts of the process of the self-generation of the sense. Since humans are “symbolic animals”, everything in their experience, being, action, beliefs, thinking, is coded by various cultural symbolic systems of languages, practices, techniques, etc. (cf., e.g., Richir 2018, 458-464; Richir 2015, 247).

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