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Dialogue with Nature and the Ecological Imperative

Abstract:

The aim of the paper is to discuss the idea of dialogue with nature. Even though the idea of dialogue with animals, plants – even objects of inanimate nature – is well known, it has usually been treated as an expression of a naive or folk view. Yet, it has recently gained in importance as an idea that is used to describe an ecological approach to natural environment and tends to be treated as a foundation for an ecological culture. A note-worthy contribution to the reconsideration of the concept of human-nature dialogue has also been given by a number of contemporary philosophers who have offered an environmental reinterpretation of phenomenology and hermeneutics based on, among other things, Martin Buber's concept of the I-You relationship. The paper will focus on two aspects of the concept of dialogue, namely on its epistemological and ethical implications. Following Erazim Kohák's theory, which will be presented as a key figure of a particular manner of speaking about nature, one that leads to ecological personalism.

Keywords:

dialogue, ecology, hermeneutics, nature, personalism, phenomenology

1. Introduction: Opening a Dialogue with Nature

The past fifty years have brought deep changes to the manner in which people experience the natural environment.[1] In the mid-twentieth century, the awareness of human exploitation of natural resources and of all the processess that were subsequently subsumed under the umbrella term "ecological crisis" was still quite new. Today, the ecological crisis is almost unanonimously regarded as the most important and most imminent global challenge that humanity inevitably has to face.

Not only have people become environmentally conscious, but there has also been a significant change in how the green consciousness itself is defined. For many years solving ecological crises was thought to be mainly a question of inventing and using green technologies that would prevent us from destroying natural environments or – to put it in other words – it was believed that in order to stop ecological crisis it was enough to modify the instrumentality of reason. More recently, however, this view has been largely questioned because of the way it reduces ecological crises to a technical dimension and hence it overlooks what seems to be really at stake – namely people's attitude toward nature.[2] Thus, nowadays being ecologically concious does not amount solely to being aware of and opting for green solutions, but also to be willing to limit one's instrumental approach to natural environments or even to refuse it, if possible. Once ecological issues have ceased to be identified solely with natural sciences and technology, there is a unanimous belief that a redefinition of the "instrumentality" of the instrumental reason is as much needed as developing a new sort of everyday *praxis* whose ecological character is to be guaranteed by scientific discoveries and technological inventions.

It is useful to recall that the term "ecology" was used for the first time by Ernst Haeckel who coined in 1866 the neologism *Ökologie* by taking the Greek word *oikos* – a term with a complex meaning as it denotes the family, the household, the dwelling place – and adding the suffix to it in such a way as to make it similar to "biology." Such an invention was not a coincidence since according to Haeckel the new science was supposed to be a branch of biology analyzing all the relationships between organisms and their habitats, that is all the conditions of their existence. Seen in this way, ecology may also cover the relationhips between humans and their social or natural environments; in fact, according to many contemporary approaches, for example human ecology, it does). It should be noticed, though, that in such a case the object of study might not only be the interactions between people and their social or natural surroundings, but also the way in which they experience themselves and their circumstances. In fact broadening the scope of ecology was inevitable because conditions of human existence cannot be reduced to material subsistence just as inhabiting cannot be conceived of as nothing more than physical presence in a place.

The aforementioned shift in the understanding of ecological issues reflects the recognition of the fact that the experiential aspect of human existence is important, if not crucial, in relation to natural environments. This change, which can be termed (for lack of a better word) eco-phenomenological, is related to a similar one that ocurred in the humanities. It has been acknowledged that in order to understand humans one has to take into account their relationships with their enviroments and that these relationships are defined by how people experience these environments, as well as their own self conscious engagement with them. As a result, a number of new approaches have appeared in anthropology, archaeology, geography and cultural studies, many of them inspired by phenomenology. Philosophy too has recognized the demand to analyze the way people relate to

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[1]   Inspired by phenomenology I shall use the term "experience" in a very broad sense as referring to any manner in which one becomes aware of something.

[2]   For the sake of simplicity "nature" will mean non-human or other-than-human beings or entities such as animals, plants, rocks and so forth; accordingly, "natural environment" will denote the non-human environment.

their world and such approaches as eco-phenomenology or environmental hermeneutics have been developed.[3] As a result, it turned out that it was indispensable to confront ecology understood as a natural science with human sciences.[4]

In other words, the idea of *oikos* has been reinterpreted in such a way that ecology still analyzes the relationships between humans and their environment, the latter being conceived of as a dwelling place. However, dwelling means not only physical occupation of a place and interaction with it, but also imbuing it with meanings and values. Such a perspective allows one to see nature not as an objective reality governed by immutable rules, but as a sphere that comes to existence thanks to people's experiences and practices. Given that these vary a lot, one should not speak of nature but of natures.[5] It has even been suggested that we should get rid of the concept of nature as useless.[6] Putting aside innumerable contemporary philosophical debates on the existence or inexistence of nature, one can notice that they gravitate around the issue of people's experiences of nature – to put it briefly, the question is whether nature is something that exists independently from how people experience it or not.

Human experiences of nature are, of course, a complex philosophical topic. One of its facets is the question; "What factors may shape it?" It is an important topic for at least two reasons. First, if it turned out that philosophical arguments – as those offered by, for example, environmental philosophers – are not able to change the way people experience nature, this would mean that from an ecological point of view environmental philosophy is useless. It goes without saying that it is not enough to criticize the "instrumentality" of instrumental reason, it has to be replaced by some other kind of rationality. Second, since it is not possible to divorce experiences from *praxis*, finding out how the former may be shaped amounts to discovering how to change the latter.

Undoubtedly, rational arguments may be powerful enough to influence people's minds and hearts. Yet, this is not the only way to modify them. Another factor that shapes our experiences is imagination fueled by, among other things, images that can be found in art, literature, and popular culture analyzed in ecocritical studies. It may also be pointed out that on the more basic level our experiences are determined by the words we use or our manners of speaking. This fact seems to be somewhat underestimated in philosophy or environmental humanities, so relatively little attention has been paid to the ecological consequences that words and phrases may have. If, however, one wants to change people's attitude toward nature, one should start with persuading them to change the vocabulary and grammar they use whenever they speak of nature. Such a rhetorical effort may be more successful than presenting them with sophisticated argumentations for or against the idea that nature should not be treated only instrumentally. It may also stimulate the imagination and thus make people believe that nature has also non-utilitarian values. As Ludwig Wittgenstein claimed, there is a strong bond between language and forms of life – if we want to change the latter we can start with modifying the former. In other words, what is needed is an ecological linguistic idiom that would go hand in hand with a dose of "green" imagination. Even if it may not suffice to redefine or reject "instrumentality" of reason, it definitely may undermine it.

Even though the idea of dialogue with animals, plants, even objects of inanimate nature is well known, it has usually been treated as an expression of a naive or folk view epitomized by such different figures as a noble savage, an old lady talking to her pet, or a God's simpleton speaking to his "Brother Sun and Sister Moon." As

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3) See for exmple Bannon, *Nature and Experience*; Boldonova, "Environmental Hermeneutics;" Brown, *Eco-Phenomenology;* and Clingerman, *Interpreting Nature*.

4) Tyburski, *Dyscypliny humanistyczne i ekologia*.

5) See for example Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature*; and Soper, *What is Nature?*

6) Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*.

such, the above concept more often than not has not been taken seriously, to say the least, and considered worth arguing for or against. It seems, however, that ideas behind such expressions as "conversing with environment" or "conversations with landscape" have recently gained in importance.[7] So has the idea of animism together with the belief that it is reasonable not to limit the concept of person to human beings.[8] A noteworthy contribution to the appreciation of these concepts has also been given by a number of contemporary philosophers who have offered an "environmental" reinterpretation of phenomenology and hermeneutics based on, among other things, Martin Buber's concept of the *I-You* relationship.

The concept of dialogue with nature is used to cover various yet inter-related issues. It expresses the belief that the dualism between human and non-human should be avoided, which implies that the human relationships with nature should be based on sensibility and interaction. In other words, one has to recognize "the other's voice", which requires "allowing … [nature's] 'voices' to be heard and [its] presence to be felt."[9] Mathew Hall, whose words have just been quoted, is mainly interested in human-plant relations, but his claims may be applied to all natural beings:

> "Talking" is shorthand for a two-way responsive relatedness with a tree – rather than "speaking" one-way to it, as if it could listen and understand. "Talking with" stands for attentiveness to variances and invariances in behavior and response of things in states of relatedness and for getting to know such things as they change through the vicissitudes over time of the engagement with them.[10]

What is at stake, then, is an idea and a project of redefining the relationships between humans and natural environments inherent to the modern Western culture and responsible for nature's exploitation. One of the philosophical bases for it is found in Hans-Georg Gadamer, who's philosophy broadened the concept of dialogue. He rendered it useful in relation to objects such as art since he saw the aesthetic experience of an artwork or its interpretation as inherently dialogical.[11] He meant by that that – as it is the case in a dialogue between two people – the beholder or interpreter has to respect the otherness of the object and at the same time to establish a bond with it, a bond that inevitably is rooted in his or her standpoint. Gadamer did not devote much space to nature, but when he did his viewpoint was similar – even if he did not explicitly use the concept of dialogue. Instead, he referred to those aspects that he found crucial for an authentic dialogue between people:

> Nature can no longer be viewed as a mere object for exploitation, it must be experienced as a partner in all its appearances; but that means it must be understood as the other with whom we live together… . The other is not my dominion and I am not sovereign – not in the way that many explained natural appearances in the area of natural science have been made subservient. We

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7) Benediktsson, *Conversations with Landscape*; Haila, *How Nature Speaks*; see also The Open University programme *Nature Matters in Conversation* (https://www.open.edu/openlearn/nature-environment/the-environment/nature-matters-conversation/content-section-2.1 [accessed on November 1st, 2020]; see also mine, *Estetyka ogrodu. Między sztuką a ekologią*, 208–224.

8) Hall, *Plants as Persons*; Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World*; Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology."

9) Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 9 ,182.

10) Hall, "In Defence of Plant Personhood."

11) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; Lund, "Introduction: Starting a Conversation with Landscape;" Gill, "'Holding Oneself Open in a Conversation' – Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Ethics of Dialogue;" and Grün, "Gadamer and the Otherness of Nature: Elements for an Environmental Education."

must learn to respect others and otherness… . To participate with the other and to be a part of the other is the most and the best that we can strive for and accomplish… . We may perhaps survive as humanity if we would be able to learn that we may not simply exploit our means of power and effective possibilities, but must learn to stop and respect the other as an other, whether it is nature or the grown cultures of peoples and nations; and if we would be able to learn to experience the other and the others, as the other of our self, in order to participate with one another.[12]

The crux of Gadamer's claim is that people should treat nature as a partner, that is as someone/something whose otherness they are willing to recognize and acknowledge. In other words, they should assume an attitude contrasting with the dominating technological worldview that makes people treat nature as *Gestell*, as Martin Heidegger put it, and consequently, an attitude that is based on an "attempt to attain a feeling for its different form of life."[13]

There are two directions in which Gadamer's words may be interpreted. On the one hand, one may follow an epistemological path and ruminate on what the concept of dialogue implies in terms of understanding nature – the authenticity of a dialogue held by two interlocutors, according to him, lies in that it serves them to find out what the other person wants to communicate and he applies this view to the issue of interpreting works of art or mere things. On the other hand, the ethical overtone of the above quotation may be put to the foreground. These two manners of approaching the idea of dialogue are distinct, but not divergent. It seems that even though, philosophically speaking, the former interpretation may be seen as more interesting to discuss since it is much more debatable, from an ecological point of view the latter may be more decisive because it entails claims about a desirable form of life, offering a project that, despite being problematic in certain regards, may appeal to people's emotions and imagination with greater force than possible epistemological doubts.

2. Understanding Nature

Stephen Talbott, one of the advocates of the idea that we should "engage nature in respectful conversation," points out three aspects he finds typical of every conversation: "putting *cautious* questions to the Other," "compensating for past inadequacies," possibility to "take a conversation in any number of healthy directions."[14] Seen in this way, a conversation is on open ended process engaging *pari passu* all the participants whose intention is to remedy their ignorance concerning what their interlocutors have to say. Someone's will to enter a conversation and to start asking questions expresses their awareness of the the limitations of their knowledge as well as readiness to accept and adjust to the responses obtained. According to Talbott, whenever we interact with a natural environment, we pose questions to nature and the effects our practices bring about are nature's answers. In light of his theory our actions, determined by our intentions and interests, should always be accompanied by our awareness that they are limited, based on uncertain grounds and may lead to unexpected results and consequently require modifications and adjustments. Talbott also claims that nature should not be hypostatized as an immutable object on which human practices are oriented, but that it comes to being thanks to them. At the same time he seems to believe that it is possible do distinguish right practices from wrong ones or a "healthy" conversation from a rotten one. What is at stake, after all, is a better understanding of nature and that end is attainable, at least in theory. Hence, one may notice a tension in his approach: there is no nature outside the

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12) Gadamer, *Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, 233–236.

13) Smith, "Lost for Words? Gadamer and Benjamin on the Nature of Language and the 'Language' of Nature," 71.

14) Talbott, *Ecological Conversation. Wildness, Anthropocentrism, and Deep Ecology.*

conversation, but nature does not come into being in every conversation. In order for it to occur, humans as nature's interlocutors have not only to feel its presence but also and more importantly listen to its voice and respond in concord with it. The epistemological question is, then, whether there is anything that can be heard in such a way as to conduct our behavior?[15]

It is much easier to understand the claim famously made by Christopher Manes,[16] that throughout its history Western culture has silenced nature, than to decide what it means to listen to nature because this begs clarification in what sense nature can speak to us. One of the critics of the idea of dialogue with nature notices that "nature cannot speak for itself. Neither … does nature understand our speech. We are not partners in a dialogue."[17] In O'Neill's view, nature cannot listen to us since it is "indifferent … in the sense of lacking the capacity to care for us or for what we say."[18] This, however, means not that people should not take into account nature's interests, but that nature needs representation offered by human voices. Therefore, the crucial questions are "Who speaks for nature? With what legitimacy can they speak?"[19] In other words, for O'Neill the dialogue is never with nature, even if in many cases it is about nature, and by the same token the claim that it has been silenced is wrong as it implies that nature had a voice which has been taken away from it or that humankind has become deaf to what it says.

A similar line of argumentation is presented by Stephen Vogel who identifies the idea of dialogue with nature with, among other things, anti-anthropocentrism which uses it to promotes thinking of natural beings as subjects: if their muteness leads people to believe that they can do with them whatever they please, then acknowledging their ability to speak (whatever that means) is a way of recognizing that they deserve respect.[20] Vogel claims, however, that using the concept of conversation with reference to nature is deeply misleading and dangerous. It is not so much someone's subjectivity that speaking reveals as intersubjectivity, that is the fact that there is "someone with whom I can talk."[21] Thus, an act of speech institutes relationship in which the interlocutors learn something about people with whom they are speaking as well as about themselves. In Vogel's eyes, the crucial characteristic of conversation lies in its symmetry and reciprocity – "I learn that just as you appear to me as an other, as an interlocutor, so too do I appear as other to you."[22] Given that it is impossible to say of human-nature relationships that they are symmetrical and reciprocal – "do the self-speaking presences we attend and respond to in nature ever themselves give *us* their full attention in this way, engage *us*, respond to *our* claims?"[23] he asks – the concept of dialogue with nature is misinforming. It, in fact, is used to promote an approach to nature that is based solely on listening at the expense of speaking to it. As a result it does not bring the epistemological results that a conversation does.

Additionally, such an attitude runs a serious risk: since nature speaks in a language foreign to people, its "statements" have to be translated. The question is how to distinguish a translator from an impostor, a "ventriloquist" (Vogel's term) who only pretends to translate nature's voice.[24] This criticism stems from Vogel's construc-

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15) For a different account see Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous.*

16) Manes, "Nature and Silence."

17) O'Neill, "Who Speaks for Nature," 261.

18) Ibid., 262.

19) Ibid.

20) Vogel, "The Silence of Nature."

21) Ibid., 183.

22) Ibid., 184.

23) Ibid., 185; Vogel's article is also a criticism of Scott Frisckic's view point (see below).

24) Ibid., 192.

tivist perspective that makes him reluctant to accept the concept of nature as an objective sphere existing regardless of humans' actions, an idea implicit in one way or another in the idea of dialogue with nature.

One way to defend the concept of nature criticized by Vogel and to save the idea of human-nature conversation is offered by hermeneutics. As Scott Cameron shows**,** the implications of Gadamer's philosophy for our understanding of other people or cultural phenomena may be easily applied to nature.[25] On the one hand, it is not possible to grasp nature *an sich,* since our knowledge of it is always culturally mediated and historically determined**;** on the other, however, the state of knowledge is doomed to change:

> Language not only preinterprets nature; it also alerts us that nature may not be as we take it, demands that we distinguish between what we have expected and what we now see, and gives us the freedom to modify expectations in the light of our experience. And by such means we comprehend *nature* more adequately.[26]

Were we to introduce the concept of dialogue here, we could state that one should take it as expressing the idea that "our challenge … is to understand how we can conceive the world as transcending any current interpretation and how we modify that interpretation in the light of our new insights."[27] It may also be added that acknowledging that the only truths about nature we can discover are finite and thus transient is a lesson not only about nature, but also about ourselves and our epistemological abilities.

An illustration of such a dialogue between man and nature may be found in Vilém Flusser's book *Natural: Mind*, where he describes, among other things, his experience of a tree:

> A curious fact: trees are almost invisible. Every attempt to contemplate them proves it. There is a dense, multilayered mist between the one who contemplates and the tree… What stands between them are phantasms, ectoplasms, specters and ethereal bodies that hover around trees and make them inaccessible… I will mention some of these phantasms. The closest one to the one who contemplates, and therefore the easiest one to remove, is the specter of the "lung" that conceals the tree as a concrete phenomenon. I do not see a tree, I see a green lung, and I see this lung both morphologically as well as functionally. A little bit closer to the tree, but also easily removable, is the phantasm of the "shelter." I do not see a tree; I see an umbrella, both in the physical as well as in metaphorical sense of the term. Other specters hold on to the tree more firmly… When these specters are painstakingly removed, and the essence of the tree seems to want to reveal itself, we verify that it is still not the tree-ness that reveals itself, but some even deeper prejudices that probably do not even have a name.[28]

The fact that we are never able to fully experience, that is to become fully aware of the tree, does not mean we have to renounce such an effort or that there is nothing which our experiences are of and which defines their limits. Quite the contrary, once we recognize and acknoweldge our limitations, we should venture new experiences and face the fact that none of them will be definite. "I will not seek, therefore, to grasp the essence of the cedar in my park, but only one of its aspects," – Flusser concludes the above passage.

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25) Cameron, "Must Environmental Philosophy Relinquish the Concept of Nature? A Hermeneutic Reply to Steven Vogel."

26) Ibid., 115.

27) Ibid., 111.

28) Flusser, *Natural: Mind*, 35–37.

3. Respecting Nature

Despite Vogel's idea that symmetry and reciprocity typical of the human conversation cannot be shown in human-nature relationships and therefore the idea of dialogue with nature is ill-founded, these traits may define these relationships. It is, however, more a question of ethics than of epistemology. It is possible to shape one's attitude toward natural beings in such a way as to see them as capable of some sort of reciprocity. A paradigm for such a view may be found in Martin Buber's conception of I-You relationship.

Even though Buber mentions various occasions when a change of his attitude toward nonhuman beings occurred and he, for example felt "joined by [a being's] nearness and its speech" (while looking at a piece of mica) or became aware that "an animal's eyes have the power to speak a great language" (while looking at a cat)[29], the best known description of the I-You relationship referred to nature is one where he reports his experience of a tree:

> I consider a tree.
> I can look on it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background.
> I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging, pressing pits, suck of the roots breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air – and the obscure growth itself.
> I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life.
> I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternnly that I recognize it only as an expression of law – of the laws in accordancee with which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or of those in accordance with which the component substance mingle and separate.
> I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number, in pure numerical relation.
> In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution.
> It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is no longer *It*. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness. To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from wich I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.
> Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars, are all present in a single whole.
> The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it – only in a different way.
> Let no attempt be made to sap the strength from the meaning of the relation: relation is mutual.
> The tree will have a conciousness, then, similar to our own? Of that I have no experience…
> I encounter no soul or dryad of the tree, but the tree itself.[30]

What differentiates the the *I-It* relationship from the *I-You* described above is that the former is monological and based on reducing the object to the qualities that may be noticed thanks to ready-made *clichés*. In the case of nature it means that natural entities are reduced to their utilitarian values. The *I-You* relationship, instead, epitomized by the figure of dialogue, stems from openness and the will to preserve otherness and to affirm the presence of the

29) Buber, *I and Thou*, 96, 98.
30) Ibid., 7–8.

other. When the *I-You* relationship is created, natural entities are treated as human partners, which means they are allowed to be themselves and that they are recognized as actual beings which in essence are not dependent upon human points of view, interests or desires.[31] This kind of relation is, in fact, "a new way of looking, in its own right, independently of our purposes."[32] What is crucial for the Buberian account is that the *I-You* relationship redefines the *I* which becomes an *I* constituted by, among other things, the fact that is addressed by a *You*.

When applied to environmental issues, all this amounts to recognizing that an inevitably instrumental approach to nature should be accompanied by one that leads to caring for it. When engaging in the *I-You* relationship one ceases to be just an analytically and instrumentally oriented onlooker and starts to feel that nature "presents meaning; it addresses me, reaches out to contact me."[33] Such an act requires will – one has to intentionally change his or her approach to nature – but also an ability to open one's mind and to show respect, which in this case means on the one hand aesthetic and ethical sensibility, and on the other – ecological literacy.[34]

Buber's theory has been adopted by Scott Friskics whose view Vogel criticized in the paper quoted above.[35] Indeed, Friskics claims – in a manner verging on mysticism – that people should listen to nature's silenced voices and that it is a path to a "sacral co-existence" with, for example, a mountain, a natural entity that addresses humans and awaits their responses. Even though he heavily draws on the idea the mutual dimension of the *I-You* relationship, he underlines that it is asymmetrical because it is intentionally established by humans, whereas nonhuman beings cannot do it. People should engage in it in spite of this disparity precisely because they are able do it. What is more, they should do it because they are responsible for nature if not for any other reason then because they exploit it. From this perspective, the epistemological doubts raised by Vogel seem, then, to be a fair price for fulfilling the imperative that requires that people become open and affirmative towards nature without expecting reciprocity. In other words, humanity should abandon its monologue about nature and replace it with a dialogue:

> So it would seem that when trees speak to us within the framework of modern technology's device paradigm, they say "lumber;" certain animals say "meat" (or leather, ivory, recreation, etc.); rocks and earth say "metals" (or gas, oil, subdivision, etc.). But really, they say nothing at all. When eloquent, selfspeaking things are reduced to resources defined in terms of the commodities they may provide us, they become effectively silenced, denied of any voice, agency or autonomy. Here, only the terms of *our* instrumentality and commodification are spoken, exclusive human agency.[36]

Not only – as we can see – has the Western worldview silenced nature, but it has also made the idea of engaging in a dialogue with nature sound preposterous and as a result nature has been reduced to a "silent storehouse full of inert stuff – an inventory of lifeless stock."[37]

That notwithstanding, Erazim Kohák dared to ruminate on whether speaking to trees would make any sense in contemporary world.[38] According to him the idea of conversing with nature is often treated as absurd

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31) Berry, *Mutuality: the Vision of Martin Buber*; Blenkinsop, Scott, "Becoming *Teacher/Tree* and Bringing The Natural World To Students: An Educational Examination Of The Influence Of The Other-Than-Human World And The Great Actor On Martin Buber's Concept Of The *I/Thou*."

32) Berry, *Mutuality*, 35.

33) Blenkinsop, Scott, "Becoming *Teacher/Tree*," 458.

34) Salwa, "Znaczenie estetyki przyrody dla etyki środowiskowej."

35) Friskics, "Dialogical Relations with Nature."

36) Ibid., 400.

37) Ibid., 401.

38) Kohák, "Speaking to Trees."

due to the fact that conversation is generally conceived of as linguistic communication between people. This, however, does not necessarily imply mutuality – we sometimes speak to those who cannot answer them and we do not find our action out of place. If so, it is possible to think of speaking to natural beings. Speaking to them, Kohák states, means addressing them as persons, which is accompanied by an inclination to talk about them as persons. For Kohák the term "person" denotes a "mode of being" that consists in having one's own life, agenda, a role to play as well as intrinsic value, which all together makes this being worthy of respect.[39] If we define a person in this way, there is no reason to limit this concept only to human beings, since everything that lives may be characterized as having its own integrity, its life that it wants to sustain, and a function to fulfill. What is more, he claims, given that humans usually express their respect toward persons in words, once we acknowledge that nonhuman beings are persons, speaking to them turns out to be an appropriate way of relating to them, even if one cannot count on any answer. Ecological personalism amounts, then, to experiencing the world as a community of persons. It is a way of experiencing that has been forgotten in the Western world, which resulted in the depersonalized approach to nature typical of the modern era. What is needed, then, is repersonalization of the world. Not only will such a shift lead to another way of experiencing the environment, but it will also make people reconceptualize themselves. According to Kohák's personalist worldview, humans are members of the community called nature on par with other beings and in that respect are not special or higher than others in any way. The difference between humans and nonhuman beings stems from the fact that the former are less determined by their circumstances and are capable of moral responsibility. Kohák writes:

> To speak of the world as "personal" means to conceive of it as structured in terms of relations best understood on the model of meaningful relations among persons. It is to conceive of it as peopled by beings who are similarly best understood on the model of persons, modified as needed, rather than on the model of matter in motion, raised to infinite complexity.[40]

Yet, ecological personalism is not so much about understanding nature as if it were a human community as it is about offering a view that may make human and nonhuman lives better since it allows humandkind to "live sustainably at peace with itself and in harmony with its world."[41] Thus, the idea of nonhuman persons as well as the dialogue we may have with them can guide us in experiencing our place in the world. In fact it may cause us to experience nature as a sphere to which we belong and not as an object we possess.[42]

4. Conclusions: A Dialogical Culture of Nature

If finding a remedy to the ecological crisis requires changing people's attitude toward natural environments, it implies that they have to redefine their place in the universe to say it *a la* Max Scheler. However, as Kohák underlines, such a redefinition does not result in establishing a factual truth about where humans are located in the great chain of being – what is at stake here is deciding where we would like to be.[43] Making such a decision cannot be based on establishing a universal truth, since such a decision involves determining what meaning is to be assigned to nature, which can only be done in and through a lived experience:

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39) Kohák, "Speaking of Persons: Mirror or Metaphor?"

40) Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 209.

41) Kohák, "Speaking of Persons: Mirror or Metaphor?" 57.

42) Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars…*, 107.

43) Kohák, "Speaking to trees," 383.

We have the task of relating and the options of doing as the sovereign masters of a storehouse of raw materials or as dwellers in a community of beings worthy of respect, living together in a respectful transaction. When, though, we opt for the one or the other, we are not choosing between truth and falsehood. We are, rather choosing between two modes of speakings, one that heals and sustains, the other that hurts and destroys our world alike. The world and our place therein are not meaningful – *or* "meaningless" – before we opt for a manner of speaking.[44]

Such claims may, of course, be countered by stating that one has to establish first what it means to heal, sustain, kill and destroy. Yet, this would be a far-fetched analytical fastidiousness: one can debate on how to sustain something or how to avoid its destruction, but whether something flourishes or ceases to exist is beyond discussion. In other words, we are doomed to choosing between different manners of speaking that have extra-linguistic consequences and the ground for this choice is not epistemology, but ethics. Opting for any of the two idioms amounts, then, to opting for two different modes of being and acting.

Advocating a manner of speaking that presents nature as a partner in a dialogue means not so much promoting a particular set of beliefs but a particular condition of existence.[45] Such a condition would be that of "ontological humility"[46] based on recognizing "subject inherent to object"[47] and characterized by the virtue of listening and attentiveness to the other.[48] Practically speaking:

> What is involved here is a movement from a monological to a dialogical conception of the human self and its possibilities for relationship to the non-human world. These reframings prepare the ground for movement from monological and dualistic types of relationship with nature toward the kinds of structures of relationship we need to develop to begin addressing the environmental crisis at the level of culture. They can open the way for a culture of nature that allows for much more in the way of contextual and negotiated relationships of communication, balanced dialogue, and mutual adjustment between species, starting with our own, in what could become a liberatory blending or mingling of nature and culture.[49]

Thus, the idea of dialogue may be seen as a foundation for a new sort of culture, one that hopefully will be less exploitative toward nature as well as toward humans. This, however, would not have been possible if the figure of dialogue had not contributed to making us aware that hitherto culture is also based on a manner of speaking, which, being arbitrary, can be replaced by a completely different one. If what Plumwood has in mind is still a matter of the future and unfortunately may never happen, the effect that the idea of dialogue has already had on our minds is undeniable – one proof is that it has already entered the philosophical discourse – and for good, as it seems.

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44) Ibid., 383.

45) Ingold, "Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought", 10, quoted in Lund, Benediktsson, "Introduction: Starting a Conversation with Landscape," 2.

46) Manes, "Nature and Silence," 348.

47) Holer, "Is There a Thou 'Within' Nature? A Dialogue with H. Richard Niebuhr," 83.

48) Plumwood, *Environmental Culture. The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, 194–195.

49) Ibid., 193.

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