

DEMARCATIÖNS  
RAZMEJITVE

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# PHAINOMENA

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# LEVINAS VS. MALDINEY

## ON THE FACE OF SENSIBLE NATURE

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*Abstract*

Were environmental ethics part of politics, as Levinas suggests, then it would run the danger of privileging human interests and downplaying the power of nature's own ethical call. This is why the present article against Levinas argues that nature needs and has a face in the strong ethical sense. It begins by extracting the definitional criteria of the face from Levinas, and then—through an excursion into the work of Maldiney, whose relevance for eco-phenomenology it wants to highlight—follows some of the

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attempts to extend the concept of face beyond human ethics. Thus, the article concludes that sensible nature, giving itself as Maldiney's event, does not have a *human* face, but the encounter with its transcendence in its various facialities has a similar ethical force, from which an eco-phenomenological ethics of nature could grow.

*Keywords:* eco-phenomenology, environmental ethics, nature, face, Levinas, Maldiney.

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### **Levinas proti Maldineyju. O obličju občutljive narave**

#### *Povzetek*

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Če bi okoljska etika bila del politike, kakor predlaga Levinas, bi bila izpostavljena nevarnosti privilegiranja človeških interesov in razvrednotenja moči lastnega etičnega klica narave. Zato pričujoči prispevek proti Levinasu dokazuje, da narava potrebuje in ima obličje v strogem etičnem smislu. Avtor začne z opredelitvijo definicijskih kriterijev za obličje pri Levinasu in nato – z ekskurzom k delu Maldineyja, čigar relevantnost za eko-fenomenologijo želi posebej poudariti – sledi nekaterim poskusom razširitve pojma obličja onkraj človeške etike. Prispevek sklene, da čuteča narava, ki se daje kot Maldineyjev dogodek, sicer nima *človeškega* obličja, vendar srečanje s transcendo njenih raznoterih obličij poseduje podobno etično silo, na podlagi katere bi lahko zrasla eko-fenomenološka etika narave.

*Ključne besede:* eko-fenomenologija, okoljska etika, narava, obličje, Levinas, Maldiney.

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## Introduction

As one might see in the constant hesitation both of individuals and of their political representatives to accept different measures proposed by ecologists to alleviate the environmental crisis,<sup>1</sup> ecology still lacks deeper roots in *Lebenswelt* (cf. Abram 1988, 101). In the world of our lives, no one doubts the value of nature—nature is not just distant scientific data or predictions based on it, but an admirable spontaneity (*phusis*) that permeates life all around us, including our own bodies (cf. Toadvine 2014, 274–277). This is why it seems that eco-phenomenology constitutes a complement to ecology: by focusing on “natural values” directly appearing in our pre-scientific experience of nature, eco-phenomenology can—among other things—justify why we should listen to ecologists at all. It is quite understandable that one of the major sources of eco-phenomenological—still quite young<sup>2</sup>—scholarship has been the work of Emmanuel Levinas, one of the most influential thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and arguably the greatest ethicist of his time, who draws on phenomenological positions. And this is the case despite the legitimate objections of some interpreters that Levinas’s conception of ethics is too anthropocentric, anthropologocentric, or humanist (see, e.g.: Atterton 2018, 709–710; Benso 2000, 136; Smith 2012, 140), or that all Levinas might offer for an environmental ethics is not his ethics, but “only” his politics in the sense of critical discussion and comparison of the interests of various beings, even the non-human ones (cf. Halls 2012, 44–48; Perpich 2012, 85–87).

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1 An example might be that although most countries in the world agreed at the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference in Paris to try to radically reduce greenhouse gas emissions, some countries and private companies are not honoring their commitments.

2 The first eco-phenomenological books can be considered to be Kohák’s *The Embers and the Stars* from 1984 and Evernden’s *The Natural Alien* from 1985.

However, this could be a problem from the point of view of environmental ethics: if nature ethics were to be derived from humanist ethics (if it were indeed located “on the fringes of the human world”<sup>3</sup>), then it would run the danger of privileging human interests and downplaying the power of nature’s own ethical call—and that is exactly what is happening in today’s political discussions on environmental issues. D. Perpich nevertheless argues that responsibility to nature does not require a face-to-face encounter, and that Levinas’s contribution to eco-phenomenology by means of politics is sufficient as the interests of non-human beings are not secondary in it (Perpich 2012, 93). That may be true,<sup>4</sup> but then the main question one must ask is *why* their interests are not secondary, and it seems that—if they are really supposed to enjoy the same respect as the human ones—then nature must have something like a face and politics must be based on an ethics of encounter with it. For other types of eco-phenomenological ethics—for example, those based on participatory approaches, according to which ethics proceeds from the fact that nature is a familiar partner for humans, that in it one encounters the familiar face of things, with which our bodies communicate intimately<sup>5</sup>—run the risk of turning the Other (nature) into the Same (human subjectivity). If an ethics of nature is not to be left to the contingency of the good will of the human subject, as S. Benso puts it (Benso 2000, xxxviii), it must stand firmly on the respect for nature’s otherness, for its transcendence or resistance to human reason. Accordingly, eco-phenomenology must deal with a face

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3 “Pure nature, when it does not attest to the glory of God, when it is no one’s, indifferent and inhuman nature, is situated on the fringes of this human world, and it is only understandable as such on the plane of the human world of property.” (Levinas 1987, 28–29.)

4 Levinas writes: “Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, coexistence, contemporaneity, assembling, order [...] and thence also a *copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice*.” (Levinas 1991, 157; my emphasis.) And politics might not really diminish ethics: “In no way is justice a degradation of obsession, a degeneration of for-the-other [...]” (Ibid., 159.)

5 An example of such a conception is Abram’s book *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, which is based on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and ontology of flesh: “The thing and the world [...] are offered to perceptual communication as is a familiar face with an expression which is immediately understood.” (Merleau-Ponty 2005, 376.)

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of nature turning away, the obverse of our corporeal involvement in it (cf. Toadvine 2017, 193–195).

To put it another way, the main force of Levinas's (human) ethics must also be applied to the sought-after phenomenological ethics of nature. Levinas is the author of a descriptive ethics, in which the encounter with an external singular being is at stake,<sup>6</sup> the encounter whose ethical force arises from the disruption of the Same. In other words, what prompts me to act ethically is not any pre-given moral law (like Kant's categorical imperative), but my own experience, in which I encounter an absolute otherness that I can deal with adequately, only if I listen to it and respect how it presents itself. This is how Levinas's ethics still seems to be the path that a phenomenological ethics of nature should take (if it does not want to reduce the interests of nature to the interests of humans). And this is why interpreters have attempted to extend his ethics to include the otherness of nature, proposing to build on, for example, Levinas's own hesitations about the face of animals, although they add that Levinas will have to be supplemented by new considerations that he did not undertake himself. Thus, for example, S. Benso (2000) proposes, by means of reading Heidegger's analysis of things, to extend the notion of alterity to include the "facialities" of things; similarly, C. Diehm (2003) picks up on the ethics of Hans Jonas and proposes to extend the concept of the face to all living beings; T. Toadvine (2012), for his part, wants to correct Levinas's conception of nature through his reading of Merleau-Ponty; and E. Mooney (2012) supplements Levinas's descriptions of the human face with Thoreau's descriptions of encounters with the various faces of nature, including that of a river.

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However, if any such attempt is to be successful, and if it makes sense to speak of a face, faces, or facialities of nature, then it must be possible to discover in the case of things, plants, animals, or eco-systems a revelation of a transcendence similar to what Levinas describes in the case of an encounter with another human being. To find such natural phenomena, there must be criteria, derived from Levinas's definition of the face, by which one can measure all such attempts. Therefore, in this paper, I will first consider the

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<sup>6</sup> "Moral consciousness is not an experience of values, but an access to external being." (Levinas 1990, 293.)

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concept of the face in Levinas and determine its basic definitional properties. Then, I will follow up on the aforementioned attempts via an excursion into the work of Henri Maldiney. Maldiney not only synthesizes them all in a remarkable way, but also adds crucial phenomenological descriptions of the metaphysical transcendence of nature that are not found in the above-mentioned authors—the descriptions, on the basis of which we can attribute a face to it. He is one of the representatives of contemporary phenomenology in France, which seems to be suited to our quest for Levinas's transcendence in nature: for French phenomenologists—often influenced by Levinas, but also by the late Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty—shift the core of the appearing to the transcendence of sensible nature.<sup>7</sup> As far as Maldiney is concerned, he describes the encounter with such transcendence as an event whose manifestation has—as will be demonstrated—features similar to those of Levinas's face. I aim to show that nature certainly does not have a *human* face, but the encounter with its transcendence in its various forms has a similar ethical force, out of which an eco-phenomenological ethics of nature could grow.

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### **Face in Levinas**

It is well known that the true transcendence of human existence is, according to Levinas, the encounter with the face of another human being. The face itself is “the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*” (Levinas 1979, 50), which means that the face does not refer to any sensible qualities or empirical identities, it is neither seen, touched, imagined, nor thought (cf. *ibid.*, 94), in short, it cannot be contained in the immanence of one's experience of the Other. The face “is by itself and not by reference to a system” (*ibid.*, 75), the Other presented by her face is a unique person whose expression lies only there where she expresses herself in person, on her own. How, then, does the face appear? Levinas lists a lot of ways: in

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<sup>7</sup> I am aware that similar attempts to formulate an ethics of nature based on the transcendence or the ungraspable presence of nature can be found in non-Western environmental ethics, some of which inspired the authors quoted in this text (e.g., D. Abram). However, due to its limited scope, this article voluntarily limits itself to the Western phenomenological tradition.

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his phenomenology of the *Eros*, for instance, he lists as manifestations of the face of the Beloved the passivity or powerlessness of the lover (cf. *ibid.*, 254 *sq.*). He speaks about all the moments of the relationship, in which the lover's experience is no longer "constituted" by her immanence, but by the Beloved as transcendence: for example, the suffering of the lover from unrequited love or the pleasure, in which the suffering of the lover is transformed into happiness only by the will of the Beloved. When faced with such transcendence, the lover has no choice but to move towards it with care, with tenderness, so as not to violently disturb it. The experience of the Beloved's face is an experience coming from a future "never future enough" (*ibid.*, 254–255), in relation to which the lover must incessantly project herself according to the manifestations of the Beloved (*ibid.*, 264). The lover's desire, tenderness, or the aforementioned suffering are three of the many ways, in which the face of the Other appears in love.

However, the way, in which the Other *par excellence* manifests herself and calls one's egoistic freedom into question, is language coming from metaphysical inaccessible heights or unassumable diachronic past (Levinas 1991, 14–15). The speaking Other is "a living presence" of exteriority (Levinas 1979, 66), expressing herself as directing her manifestation, as preceding it, and, therefore, remaining irreducible both to the content of her speech and all the visible or tangible gestures and expressions (*ibid.*, 194–195). For me, it is "the experience of something absolutely foreign" (*ibid.*, 73), to which only the idea of infinity corresponds (*ibid.*, 196); the height, from which the speaking Other comes to me, is inaccessible. And yet, the Other—by means of the sound of speech<sup>8</sup>—"cuts across [my] sensibility" (*ibid.*, 173), she is revealed from the interiority whose separation or finitude is necessary to establish the relationship to the Infinite. It is as if my sensibility was no longer mine in the sense of an egoistic capacity of sensation—it became a place of disintegration of my identity or a new capacity of welcome, hospitality, and responsibility for the Other (*ibid.*, 205), or the "psyche in the form of a hand that gives even the bread taken from its own mouth" (Levinas 1991, 67). This is how the Other

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<sup>8</sup> The medium of the revelation of ethical significance is the "sonorité du son" (Levinas 2011, 90).

cuts across sensibility without losing her absolute exteriority—the otherness of the Other remains in her, it is more than just an opposite of the separate self, it is irreducible to their relationship and to the way one experiences it. Levinas sums it up as follows:

[The speech carries a meaning that] is not produced as an ideal essence; it is said and taught by presence, and teaching is not reducible to sensible or intellectual intuition, which is the thought of the same. To give meaning to one's presence is an event irreducible to evidence. It does not enter into an intuition; it is a presence more direct than visible manifestation, and at the same time the remote presence—that of the other. This presence dominates him who welcomes it, comes from the heights, unforeseen, and consequently teaches its very novelty. (Levinas 1979, 66.)

164 The only possible response to such teaching is to welcome the Other and to listen to what she really says (and not only to one's interpretations of it), which finally results in the plurality or fraternity of human community, in which "one is responsible for oneself and for the Other" (ibid., 214).

On the basis of this rather rough—but, for the purposes of this article, sufficient—description, one can now formulate four main traits of the face. 1) It comes from the metaphysical or ethical heights outside the ontology of being (it is a new type of transcendence with regard to Husserl, Heidegger, or Merleau-Ponty). 2) By being affected by the face even before the possibility of perceiving, thinking, or acting, one is "more passive than all passivity" (Levinas 1991, 14, 146). 3) The metaphysical height or diachronic past as the origin of ethical significance is inaccessible, and yet, it "cuts across sensibility," the Other as absolutely escaping is revealed from the interiority. 4) It is revealed, but there is no content of the face, the otherness of the Other remains in her.

So, is there such a thing as a face of nature? Levinas refuses this possibility. As nature does not speak, as its face is reducible to our experience of it, its transcendence is of a different type than that of the Other—it is not an *absolute* transcendence. Its transcendence manifests itself as insecurity or threat to our life within and from the elements. Nature is what the I faces from its

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home and transforms it to the Same: “The feat of having limited a part of this world and having closed it off, having access to the elements I enjoy by way of the door and the window, realizes extraterritoriality and the sovereignty of thought [...]” (Levinas 1979, 169–170.) Thus, insofar as the subject lives from what engulfs it, insofar as the nocturnal side of nature is a “modality of enjoyment and separation,” it is not a question of “the absolute interval from which the absolutely exterior being can rise” (ibid., 191). It is as if there were no transcendence at all: in enjoyment, nature, though not totally controllable, is accessible, and not radically different. The danger from the elements is a danger to the Same who lives in pre-established harmony with the surrounding world (ibid., 145). Nature in the sense of “indifferent and inhuman nature is situated on the fringes of this human world, and it is only understandable as such on the plane of the human world of property” (Levinas 1987, 28–29).

But, could one not find something like a face in this threat from the elemental nature? What is certain is that, according to Levinas, it makes no sense to speak of a face in the case of something that surrounds us on all sides. There is no actual face of the element, because 1) one is “stepped in it”<sup>9</sup> and because 2) the elemental nature overflows the domicile anonymously, coming from nowhere like faceless gods.<sup>10</sup>

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Thus, something like a “face” of nature—that would require a formulation of ethical requirements—does not exist according to Levinas. With respect to the definitional criteria of the face listed above, one can say that nature in Levinas does not have a face as it does not descend from a metaphysical height and is—to a certain degree—assimilable despite its transcendence, so that the

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9 “To tell the truth the element has no side at all. One does not approach it. The relation adequate to its essence discovers it precisely as a medium: one is stepped in it; I am always within the element. Man has overcome the elements only by surmounting this interiority without issue by the domicile, which confers upon him an extraterritoriality [...]” (Levinas 1979, 131.)

10 “This coming forth from nowhere opposes the element to what we will describe under the name of face, where precisely an existent presents itself personally. To be affected by a side (face) of being while its whole depth remains undetermined and comes upon me from nowhere is to be bent toward the insecurity of the morrow. The future of the element is lived concretely as the mythical divinity of the element. Faceless gods, impersonal gods to which one does not speak [...]” (Ibid., 142.)

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I has access to it through the doors and windows of its house, which gives it concrete content:

Man [...] gets a foothold in the elemental by a side already appropriated: a field cultivated by me, the sea in which I fish and moor my boats, the forest in which I cut wood; and all these acts, all this labor, refer to the domicile. Man plunges into the elemental from the domicile [...]. (Ibid., 131.)

166 The question remains, however, whether Levinas is describing the way, in which the transcendence of nature appears correctly, and thus whether ethical issues, indeed, concern merely humans, and whether the obligations humans have towards nature are derived—as Levinas affirms—from the relation to the Other, from the ethical exigency not to approach the Other “with empty hands” (Levinas 1990, 26). In contrast to Levinas, I will—especially, with the help of Maldiney whose relevance to eco-phenomenology I want to highlight—argue that this could be an unacceptable reduction of human relations to nature, and that nature has its own face, towards which we do have ethical obligations. While Levinas claims that “society must be a fraternal community to be commensurate with the straightforwardness, the primary proximity, in which the face presents itself to my welcome” (Levinas 1979, 214), I will attempt to demonstrate why humans should create such a community even with non-human beings. The question now is, therefore, why and how precisely humans should elevate or raise non-human beings to the rank of other human beings, which seems to be the main question of the whole environmental ethics (see, e.g., Kohák 2000, 2).

### **Two options of non-human faces**

In principle, there are two basic options of still drawing on Levinas and talking about a face of nature.

1) Nature could have a face even within the framework of Levinas’s philosophy, were one to demonstrate that the notion of the face (with its four criteria) is independent from the capacity of (human) speech. Levinas

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himself opens this way when saying that the lack of language, e.g., in a mute person, does not mean a lack of expression (Levinas 1996, 16), and that what challenges the spontaneity of the I is not the content of the Other's speech, but his very presence (Levinas 1979, 66). When explicitly asked whether or not it is "necessary to have the potential for language in order to be a 'face' in the ethical sense," he says: "I think the beginning of language is in the face. In a certain way, in its silence, it calls you." (Wright, Ainley, Hughes, and Levinas 1998, 169).

All discussions about the possibility of an animal face are also related to this. As the following response in the same interview shows, Levinas approaches them with hesitation:

I don't know if a snake has a face. I can't answer that question [but i]t is clear that, without considering animals as human beings, the ethical extends to all living beings. We do not want to make an animal suffer needlessly and so on. But the prototype of this is human ethics. Vegetarianism, for example, arises from the transference to animals of the idea of suffering. The animal suffers. It is because we, as human, know what suffering is that we can have this obligation. (Ibid., 172.)

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Based on this and other passages, C. Diehm affirms that the face in Levinas is first and foremost defined by its nudity, by its vulnerability related to its exposure to wounds in the flesh, to violence, to suffering (Diehm 2003, 173), which, as Levinas himself puts it, leads to "the ethical perspective of the inter-human" (Levinas 1998, 94) by troubling us, by the fact that we are moved by the suffering of the Other, which makes us responsible for it. Thus, Diehm concludes, "the ethical resistance of the face is found wherever there is life, [...] any body that strives or struggles is a mortal body, forsaken and destitute, capable of suffering [...]" (Diehm 2003, 182).

If this were the case and the basis of ethical responsibility were experience with a body, against which violence is perpetrated, then—together with S. Benso—one could be even more radical and argue that not only living beings, but also things have something like faces—or rather "facialities" (Benso 2000, xxix). However, it is still not clear how precisely a suffering animal, a tree, or

even a rock could come from the same height as the human Other. It is not clear how precisely the suffering of non-human others affects me, how they could “cut across my sensibility,” if they do not speak, and whether it is not reducible to transcendence of Levinas’s element, which is according to him not a true transcendence. To demonstrate that nature has its own ethical face, manifesting itself as a true transcendence, one must leave the framework of Levinas’s philosophy and deal with the second option of the possibility of a face of nature. One has to make analyses that Levinas himself did *not* make, either because he asked different questions (and did not investigate, e.g., the alterity of things as Benso did) or because he succumbed to certain prejudices (as, e.g., Toadvine shows in connection with his concept of nature; Toadvine 2012, 178–179).

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2) In other words, the second option consists in demonstrating that there are phenomena in nature, in which the true or absolute transcendence is present. For example, one could show, with reference to the current research in ethology and other related disciplines, that animals do speak, that there is something in their communication that is irreducible to the immanence of human experience, and that is what makes them appear as autonomous entities capable of cutting across our human sensibility. Or, one could demonstrate that some encounters with animals, even the non-speaking ones, manifest a similar transcendence in the sense that these encounters are absolutely unpredictable, testifying to an ineffaceable gap between us and other corporeal beings. Or, one could attempt to demonstrate that both non-human “speech” and unpredictable encounters with animals are merely derived phenomena, and that nature as such, the whole nature understood as sensible living being (*phusis*), manifests itself—in contrast to what Levinas thinks—as a transcendence, imposing itself upon human sensibility without losing its *absolute* exteriority. It is especially the followers of Merleau-Ponty, especially those belonging to contemporary French (processual) phenomenology (H. Maldiney, M. Richir, or R. Barbaras), who describe how such a transcendence manifests itself phenomenologically.

In the second part of this article, I will pick up mostly on the work of Henri Maldiney, one of the French phenomenologists who radicalized phenomenological *epoché*, in order to discover pre-intentional levels of our lived experience with sensible nature. Together with Maldiney, I will argue that

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the transcendent face of nature manifests itself as an event comparable to the encounter with the human face in Levinas.

### Henri Maldiney on the event

As Henri Maldiney (1912–2013) is seldom listed as one of the leading French phenomenologists (which is unjust, as I will attempt to indicate), let us start with a short introduction. The fact that he is not well-known is related to the circumstance that for many decades he was a man of the word rather than written text. As a popular teacher in Gent, Belgium, and then at the University of Lyon, France, he influenced many generations of students, but did not publish his first significant book before 1973. He paid his attention to three main fields of research: art, phenomenology, and psychopathology. Encounters understood as unpredictable events were formative even in Maldiney's life: he was introduced to phenomenology during World War II when he was captured in Germany—his copies of Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Husserl's *Ideas I* came from the library of the prison camp. Of equal importance were his encounters and friendships with various artists, such as poets Francis Ponge and André du Bouchet, painters Jean Bazaine, Tal Coat, and his wife, Elsa Maldiney, or with various psychotherapists, such as Ludwig Binswanger, Roland Kuhn, Gisela Pankow, and Leopold Szondi. For many decades, Maldiney was a teacher of philosophy and aesthetics, rooted in these circles of friends, who attempted to elaborate an original existential phenomenology of art, in which he arrived at his notion of event that constitutes the core of his phenomenological thinking.

Unlike Levinas—who was on the committee when Maldiney received a professorship for the work *Aîtres de la langue et demeures de la pensée* in 1974—, Maldiney considers the encounter with the Other as just one of the examples of metaphysical transcendence (as we will see below). Maldiney describes a transcendence irreducible to the transcendence of *Dasein's* projection, and therefore groups together (under the name of the event) what Levinas strictly distinguishes: the metaphysical transcendence of the Other and the transcendence of impersonal sensible element, from which subjectivity lives

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(*vivre de ...*).<sup>11</sup> For Maldiney, metaphysical transcendence is a dimension of reality that we first encounter through our sensation (*sentir*):

Encounter it is to *find oneself* in the presence of another whose formula we do not possess, and whom it is impossible for us to reduce to the same, to the identity of the project of the world, of which we are the usher. E. Levinas justly evokes in *Totality and Infinity* “the transcendence of the face of the Other” who envelops us and overhangs us, obliging us to consider ourselves according to him. [...] There is no longer any question, in relation to him, of a project. I cannot open the project of another, who is nevertheless there, and who steals this there—that nevertheless I exist—from my own possibility. *This is the case every time I have the revelation of otherness, of any otherness. But it is the dimension of reality.* [...] *This conjunction of otherness and reality begins with the encounter that is (human) sensation [sentir], where something, each time anew, lightens up in my own day, which only dawns with it.*<sup>12</sup>

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What Maldiney calls “event,” then, is a dimension of reality that makes it—by revealing its otherness—the “real real” (*le réel réel*) (cf. Maldiney 2001, 93). Maldiney liked to quote von Weizsäcker: “We fully believe only in what we have seen only once [...]. Any repetition weakens belief. It raises the suspicion of a legality, not a reality.” (Maldiney 1991, 417; cf., e.g., Maldiney 2012, 24.)

11 Moreover, Levinas does not employ the term “event” for an individualizing event, but for “an event of being, as the openness of a dimension indispensable, in the economy of being, for the production of infinity” (Levinas 1979, 240).

12 “Rencontrer, c’est *se trouver* en présence d’un autre, dont nous ne possédons pas la formule et qu’il nous est impossible de ramener au même, à l’identité du projet de monde dont nous sommes l’ouvreur. E. Levinas évoque en toute justesse, dans *Totalité et infini*, ‘la transcendance du visage d’autrui’ qui nous enveloppe et nous surplombe, nous obligeant de nous envisager à lui. [...] Il n’est plus question, par rapport à lui, de projet. Je ne peux ouvrir le projet d’un autre, qui pourtant est là, et qui dérobe ce là, que pourtant j’existe, à ma propre possibilité. *Il en est ainsi chaque fois que j’ai la révélation de l’altérité, de n’importe quelle altérité. Or elle est la dimension de la réalité.* [...] Cette conjunction de l’altérité et de la réalité commence à cette rencontre qu’est le sentir (humain) où quelque chose, à chaque fois nouveau, s’éclaire à mon propre jour qui ne se lève qu’avec lui.” (Maldiney 1991, 315–316; my emphasis.)

Hence, the event as the core of reality is primarily singularity, happening only once, it is not a visible event (a car accident, sunrise, meeting with a friend, etc.) that has its place in an explanatory context of a causal chain of facts and repeats itself to a certain extent. This level of explanation is put into brackets by radicalized phenomenological *epoché*, which allows Maldiney to see that every perception of a visible thing and its surroundings is preceded by the givenness of the very material of the perceptual world in sensation. Such an event (such a compound of sensations unpredictably growing together) puts a living organism in a more or less critical situation, because it breaks its trusting closeness to the things of the sensible world and forces him to adapt (Maldiney 2001, 74). Humans, however, do not live after the manner of other living beings, they *exist*, and so they experience such a crisis as a new “throw” (into the world), on the basis of which they have to project themselves or understand themselves and the world differently (Maldiney 1991, 320, 322): “The event is a throw of the world. This throw is not that of a project.”<sup>13</sup> The event is, thus, a crisis of being-in-the-world, in which a rift further opens up, i.e., a manifestation of the abyssal transcendence, which being-in-the-world has ignored and which, similarly to Levinas, questions the finite by the force of the infinite (Maldiney 2001, 91–92). Maldiney explicitly affirms this closeness to Levinas elsewhere, while again clearly extending Levinas’s experience of the transcendence of the Other to the experience of every event: “The other, says Levinas, is the one I cannot invent; I would add: the one I cannot be. [...] In relation to the other, I am in a situation of passivity and welcome, as I am in relation to any event.”<sup>14</sup> There are many different sorts of events, in which the event in this sense of transforming singularity is most obvious: momentous visible events, personal or collective catastrophes, such as a serious disease, or the event *par excellence*, according to Maldiney: the work of art, in which the artist rhythmically captures her encounters with the sensible being of the world (cf. Maldiney 1973, 226–227; Escoubas 2006, 71).

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13 “L'événement est jet du monde. Ce jet n'est pas celui d'un projet.” (Maldiney 1991, 318; cf. Maldiney 2001, 75.)

14 “L'autre, dit Levinas, est celui que je ne peux pas inventer; j'ajouterai: celui que je ne peux pas être. [...] Au regard de l'autre je suis dans une situation de passivité et d'accueil comme à l'égard de tout événement.” (Maldiney 2001, 103.)

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## Nature as an event

But, in what sense does the sensible nature appear as an event? As Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Visible and the Invisible*, 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.*). And it is exactly this situatedness of the body within the material world, its thickness or depth, that leads to the fact that no perception grasps the entire depth of the perceived.<sup>15</sup> Thus, we can interact with sensible nature through perception or cognition, without ever being able to reduce its transcendence, which makes every encounter with its parts (plants, trees, or even mountains) into an event. For instance, Maldiney describes an unconditional emergence of the mountain during a walk: the peak of the mountain emerges from the mist and appears to the walker afloat in the sky without his awareness of the connection between this peak and the soil under her steps. Thus, the mountain appears all of a sudden, from the abyss of its own initiative and absolutely beyond the walker's initiative (Maldiney 1973, 145, 178).

172 Similarly, Maldiney analyses a hunter's unexpected encounter with a chamois in the mountains, quoting her own words: "We didn't see it coming—all of a sudden it was there, like a breeze, like a void, like a dream." (Maldiney 1991, 201, 406.) But, even if one is not surprised, which is usually the case, the mountain or the animal as such, as real, are present for us only through the infinity of their potential profiles or perspectives: they transcend all the profiles presented in our experience (Maldiney 1973, 230). Thus, the mountain, as the mountain Sainte-Victoire painted by Cézanne again and again, has no identity that could be represented in the painting—the mountain as real is nothing but the background (*fond*) of all our sensations (*ibid.*, 226).

In other terms, before the perception of this or that thing as an identical object that might be shared by numerous subjects, there is an always singular

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15 Note, here, that I sometimes fuse the world in this text with nature, since 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 (see Toadvine 2017, 194).

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miracle of being-there (*il y a*) (Maldiney 2001, 101), in which the sensible being reveals itself as such, in its own light, absolutely unpredictably, with no *a priori*. Maldiney stresses that such encounters go beyond the intentional perception (Husserl) or the project of the walk or that of the chase (early Heidegger), in which the walker or hunter doubtlessly anticipated what would happen. Indeed, there is an experience of a surplus, to which they must adapt themselves: the emergence of the mountain or the animal is the origin-point of a new space-time (Maldiney 1991, 406–408). Thus, for Maldiney, existence is first and foremost defined by its *pathic moment*: it communicates with the sensible being of the world through hyletic data, before these data become perceptible objects (Maldiney 1973, 136). Another example could be Cézanne’s communication with the world via the rhythm of his colors and lines, depicting the rhythm of his own existence. Or, similarly, Van Gogh communicates with the world via its yellow; long before it crystalizes into visible objects, the yellow expresses Van Gogh’s presence in the world that unfolds in the rhythm of his increasing vertigo captured by his solar swirl (*ibid.*, 137).

The bottom line is that, in this pathic communication, nature is—through its very material being—an autonomous and active partner, a partner irreducible to how it is actually given as a perceived object. Interestingly enough, the basis for such an autonomy is its “mere existence” (Abram 2010, 49). It is its mere presence that deserves human respect, and that could become the starting point for an eco-phenomenological ethics of nature. It is enough just to be, there is no need for it to be of any use to humans (Kohák 1987, 95–96). It is on the basis of such phenomenological analyses that one could formulate a “Levinasian” ethics of things, as suggested by Benso (who, however, relies a lot on late Heidegger’s poetic thought not limiting itself to phenomenology). Both cases of the encounters described above reveal a face of nature in the sense of that, which is completely uncontrollable and unpredictable: thus, one can say they come “from height,” that is, from a space beyond the walker’s and the hunter’s projects (beyond ontology), leaving them in complete passivity “more passive than all passivity.” Maldiney says that the source of the events is the side of the Openness (*Ouvert*) of appearing turned away from us (Maldiney 2012, 204). Such dark side of the Openness of appearing, also described by Maldiney as the ground (*fond*) of nature (Maldiney 1973, 184), gives rise to an



event, in which the Nothingness of absolute transcendence (non-being) passes into a being, the appearance of the chamois or the mountain (Maldiney 2001, 107). And it is of no importance that the chamois does not speak. The whole sensible nature—giving itself as an event of our sensation—manifests itself in a way similar to the face in Levinas:

[T]he event of a sensation in its proximity is an advent of the whole background of the world, as when at the bend in the street, a face, a voice, a puddle of sunlight on a wall, or the flow of the river, suddenly tearing the film of our daily movie, make us the surprise to be and to be there.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, our sensations are first and foremost “expressions of the face of the world.”<sup>17</sup>

### **A face of nature?**

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The decisive question, however, is whether such an event of sensible nature meets all the criteria mentioned above. In other words, one must ask as follows. In what sense does the event cut across my sensibility, without the mountain or the chamois losing their absolute externality? What of these encounters remains outside the immanence of the walker and the hunter when neither the mountain nor the animal speaks? What exactly disrupts the reciprocity between the walker and the mountain or the hunter and the chamois that would give the mountain and the animal a metaphysical force, which could be developed into an ethics of nature?

Benso, in her attempt to formulate an ethics of things, rejects reciprocity already in the case of our relationship with material things, pointing, in particular, to their indifference and resistance indicating that their being is

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16 “[L]’événement d’une sensation dans sa proximité est un avènement de tout le fond du monde, comme lorsqu’au détour d’une rue, un visage, une voix, une flaque de soleil sur un mur ou le courant du fleuve, déchirant tout d’un coup la pellicule de notre film quotidien, nous font la surprise d’être et d’être là.” (Maldiney 1973, 152.)

17 “Toute sensation est une expression du visage du monde [...]” (Maldiney 1991, 178.)

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situated elsewhere (Benso 2000, 141). But, is it enough to disturb that “pre-established harmony” between the human body and the body of nature, due to which Levinas refuses to speak of *absolute* transcendence in the case of nature? Or: is not the relationship between people and things immersed in the ontological element of the flesh, which mitigates the power of the transcendence of things and thus their ethical call? As can be seen from the interpretation of the transcendence of material beings above, their otherness cannot be doubted, but the question is whether it is enough for the formulation of a Levinasian-inspired ethics of nature, which requires the absence of a common homeland (*patrie commune*). Such absence can seemingly only be found in the encounter with sensible nature understood as *living (phusis)*. More precisely, the “spontaneity” of things mentioned by Benso comes not from the metaphysical height, but from the ontological depth of sensible being, to which humans belong, whereas the spontaneity of living nature seems to approach the human subjectivity by coming from a region situated somewhere *between ontological depth and metaphysical height*. Even more precisely: the true absence of reciprocity as a condition of ethics is not yet found in the case of indifferent material things, since despite all their otherness our bodies are made of the same ontological substance and are the product of a single evolutionary history, but in the case of living beings, in whose case ontological depth is intertwined with metaphysical height in the sense that their bodies are *animated* in a different way.

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According to Maldiney, nature as such is characterized by such spontaneity: “Nature does not proceed by manufacturing but by genesis, expressed by the root of the Greek word *phusis*. The root *phu* means to grow, flourish, thrive.” (Maldiney and Younès 1999, quoted from Younès 2017, 115.) This is most obvious in the case of animals: animal sentient bodies possess a unique intelligence that is creative. The animal self is a living self, just as the human one, but differently: it gives itself through the auto-movement of the animal, through the living movement, ceaselessly adapting and transforming itself according to the encounters with its *Umwelt* (Maldiney 1991, 148, 269). In this regard, Abram beautifully describes the various modes of sensory intelligence, from which humans can learn much, but only on the condition that they *rearrange* their own bodies and senses, which of course they are only capable of *to a certain extent*

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(cf. Abram 1997, 9). Magic, according to Abram, is about acquiring new senses, about thinking from the perspective of an animal or even of a forest, that is, about taking on the perspective of this fragile animal body, about lending one's own body to someone else, about taking responsibility for what one can empathize with (Abram 2010, 201–228). Empathy, however, can never—as in the (Levinas's) case of another person—be complete. B. Bannon (2014, 133), in his elaboration of Merleau-Ponty's processual concept of nature, affirms that every living body expresses nature according to its own "dimensions," i.e., according to its various institutions, mediating the body's contact with its environment (whether these are bodily institutions, such as the number and role of individual senses, the shape of the body, the number of limbs, etc., or those acquired in the course of life and accumulated in the personal history of the body).<sup>18</sup> This is how animal consciousness is inefaceably or *absolutely* different: there is an irreducible gap between it and human consciousness.

176 The encounters with these intelligences are encounters with singular "facialities" of living nature. Here, together with Mooney—and in contrast to Levinas—, I must stress that we only rarely encounter nature as an anonymous threat. We most often encounter this or that animal, this or that plant, and are responsible for their particular ethical calls (cf. Mooney, Mower 2012, 285).<sup>19</sup> In their ultimately inimitable art of living, in their unique "intelligence," is situated an expression of interiority similar to that of another person speaking to us. This is why the majority of our encounters with nature are not encounters with the faceless gods of the elements, as Levinas puts it, but encounters with a singular face of this or that particular being.

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18 It must be added here that Bannon attempts to demonstrate that *every* body, not just the living body, participates in the meaning (expression) of nature. However, he himself points out that the living body is distinguished from the inanimate body by the fact that "it both opens up and exists within certain malleable forms within the sensible world [...] On the other hand, a perceived body, a non-living body, is dimensional only insofar as it acquires latency within the field of a perceiving body." (Bannon 2014, 133.) This, in my opinion, corresponds to the difference between ontology and metaphysics, which implies the possibility of an ethics of nature only in the sense of *living* nature.

19 Therefore, I do not share Casey's dilemma: either there is only a human face or the face of nature dissolves into the whole environment, thus losing its ethical urgency (Casey 2003, 193).

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Yet, it is also true that we sometimes encounter living nature as an anonymous threat. Another form of such transcendence of the face of *phusis* are natural disasters, i.e., manifestations of the animated presence of nature, shattering lives both of individuals and society. They are manifestations of the face of nature, which, although they do not speak, come from the place where ontological depth intersects with metaphysical height, leaving behind no concrete content, but only a shattered existence, the reconfigured totality of our individual or social existential possibilities, going much deeper than damages in the world of human property. Thus, the transcendence of sensible nature, appearing as an event, seems to have the same defining traits as the human face. It comes from the metaphysical height (1), leaving humans radically passive (2), but also cutting across their sensibility, (3) without having a specific content (4). The last point—the preservation of absolute exteriority of the face of nature—is phenomenologically manifested either by the inaccessibly unique intelligence of nature (in the case of an encounter with this or that natural being) or by the contentless shattering of our existence (which is the effect of the encounter with living nature as an anonymous threat). In both cases, as in Levinas, the ontological plane and its time are broken. The time of living nature seems to be close to the time of the elements, of which Toadvine speaks in his article (Toadvine 2014, 262–279). It is not the time of dead matter, but that of the living earth, which is inscribed in the immemorial past (history) of our own living bodies, and which cannot be reduced to what humans control and anticipate of it by virtue of their ontological belonging to such living earth—in this way, it is a metaphysical or diachronic time.

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Finally, it is necessary to dwell on the last objection. For it still might seem to the reader that it is not possible for sensible nature to have so similar transcendence to the human face, that, after all, the latter obviously comes from a “greater” height, that there is a more radical leap from ontology to metaphysics. In this regard, I must point out that even the Other human being in Levinas is not only absolutely different, she too is accessible “ontologically,” and yet she is situated beyond ontology (Wood 2005, 69, quoted and discussed by Toadvine 2012, 188)— exactly like the transcendence of living nature in the sense of *phusis*. Therefore, it seems that human subjectivity can be described as Levinas’s desire for the Other even in relation to nature: it lives

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in and from such mysterious nature, and yet it forever eludes us.<sup>20</sup> It is such exteriority, resistance, and autonomy that might become the basis of an eco-phenomenological ethics, of a new approach to nature that would be based on respect, reverence, or love (Kohák 1987, 212–213) expressed by attention and tenderness (Benso 2000, chap. 12) for non-human beings.

178 Ecological crisis seems to be nothing else than the consequence of our disrespect to such transcendence and spontaneity of nature, which is co-extensive, says Maldiney, with the domination of “adult” perception over “childish” sensation. Unfortunately, adults no longer perceive the space of the world as children do: children live in a concave world whose hollow envelops them, while adults live in a convex and embossed world, in which objects—the objects humans might master—have been substituted for (autonomous) things (Maldiney 1973, 121). This seems to be the main reason that only a talking human is of absolute value to them. However, from the point of view of the silent transcendence of living beings, Levinas’s transcendence of speech is destructive: humans do not see the silent otherness of nature most of the time, precisely because of how strongly they are affected by the speaking Other and by the Other’s transcendence, which they confuse with the transcendence of speech, whereas it is the transcendence of the Other’s presence, of the uniquely animated body. And this is exactly why, if there is a type of ethics in Maldiney, it should be defined as the rectification of this domination of adult objectifying perception over childish sensation (cf. Jacquet 2017, 125–134). Thus, it is no coincidence that Maldiney defines his ethics in a way very similar to what ecology literally means, i.e., “logos of the dwelling” (cf. Toadvine 2001, 76):

Aesthetics is also an ethics. *Ethos* in Greek does not only mean a way of being, but a dwelling place. Art provides man with a dwelling place, i.e., a space in which we take place, a time in which we are present—and from which, by making our presence felt in everything,

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20 It is no coincidence that this conception of subjectivity as desire, i.e., the description of its mode of being as a never-ending movement in and towards the transcendent world, is shared by many contemporary phenomenological thinkers, such as Richir, Barbaras, or Toadvine (cf. Richir 2010, 58–61; Barbaras 2008, 2011; Toadvine 2003).

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we communicate with things, beings, and ourselves *in a world*, which is called inhabiting.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

The present article has followed the various phenomenological attempts to extend Levinas's concept of the face to nature, in order to suggest an ethics, in which nature's interests would not depend on the human ones. First and foremost, it was necessary to extract criteria from the Levinasian definition of the face, by which one might measure all such attempts. In other words, a potential face of things, plants, or eco-systems must manifest a similar type of transcendence as that of the human face in Levinas: it must come from the metaphysical inaccessible height, leaving us radically passive (beyond the passivity in the sense of receptivity) when facing its revelation, but it must also affect us in our sensibility, without, however, leaving any specific content that would disturb its absolute otherness. This is why there cannot be a face of nature as Levinas defines it: the elemental nature, in and from which humans live, does not descend from any metaphysical height and is—despite its transcendence—assimilable, for the I has access to it through its dwelling, which gives it concrete content.

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However, Levinas's concept of elemental nature does not capture the full range of ways, in which nature appears. This is why the article has followed up on the aforementioned attempts (especially, the ones by S. Benso, C. Diehm, and T. Toadvine) to carry out analyses that Levinas failed to develop. Reading Henri Maldiney, it was demonstrated that sensible nature, giving itself as an event, does not have a *human* face, but the encounter with its transcendence in its various forms (i.e., the facialities of nature) has a similar ethical force, out of which a phenomenological ethics of respect for nature could grow. Sensible nature, understood as a living being (*phusis*), mastering the ultimately

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21 "L'esthétique elle aussi est une éthique. *Ethos* en grec ne veut pas dire seulement manière d'être mais séjour. L'art ménage à l'homme un séjour, c'est-à-dire un espace où nous avons lieu, un temps où nous sommes présents – et à partir desquels effectuant notre présence à tout, nous communiquons avec les choses, les êtres et nous-mêmes *dans un monde*, ce qui s'appelle habiter." (Maldiney 1973, 148.)

inimitable art of living, has expressions similar to those of other persons speaking to us. In addition to encountering the unique intelligence of this or that natural being, a face of nature manifests itself in natural disasters, in which the spontaneity of nature often becomes violent with regard to humans: it shatters both the individual and the social forms of living, forcing us to change according to what happens to us. In this respect, they are manifestations of a face of nature, which, although not speaking, come from the place where ontological depth intersects with metaphysical height, leaving behind no concrete content, but only a shattered existence. Then, we added that the ecological crisis seems to be nothing but the consequence of our disrespect to this spontaneity of nature, which is co-extensive with the domination of “adult” perception over “childish” sensation. This is why Maldiney defines ethics as the rectification of such domination of the adult objectifying perception, which brings his definition of ethics very close to the definition of ecology as the logos of dwelling (*oikos*).

180 Finally, in contrast to Levinas, the catastrophic impact of the absolute transcendence manifested in human speech was mentioned: it is precisely because humans are blinded by the glow of human speech that they overlook the silent manifestations of nature’s facialities. The article, on the other hand, tried to show why it is necessary to respect their silence and take responsibility for them (cf. Llewelyn 2003, 69). It would be a major revolution, if nature were to suddenly become as valuable as humanity. But, there actually is no other way, it is no longer possible to pretend that nature has no face, no ethical value, that there is, for example, only this oil field that humans have the right to plunder brazenly. In several places on our planet, such a revolution has already begun: in Bolivia, Ecuador, New Zealand, but also elsewhere,<sup>22</sup> the

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22 “Examples of ecocentric laws are few and far between but they feature mostly in terms of the ‘rights of nature’ paradigm. The most prominent example is arguably the Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008, the first (and still the only) constitution in the world to entrench enforceable rights of nature. Indigenous peoples in Canada have provided for the rights of nature in their legal systems, and local laws in some states in the United States have done the same. A deed of settlement in 2014 granted legal personhood to New Zealand’s Whanganui River, and that country’s recent Te Urewera Act 51 of 2014 aims to ‘establish and preserve in perpetuity a legal identity and protected status for Te Urewera [an area on the North Island of New Zealand]

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rights of nature are already enshrined in laws or even in the constitution. It is no coincidence that this has happened in these countries and under pressure from their indigenous populations. As Abram shows in his texts (cf. Abram 2010, 43), indigenous peoples are in a certain sense close to the children, of whom Maldiney speaks, not because they are at a lower level of intelligence or development, but because their relationship to nature is governed by their sensation, which makes them more respectful of the nature's presence and thus more sustainable. While there is still a problem with the enforcement of such rights, since only humans can stand up for nature in a legal case, it can be viewed as a crucial symbolic step forwards that one can understand perfectly even in terms of Western philosophy that nature is an absolutely external being with a face, an encounter with which makes us act ethically.

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for its intrinsic worth, its distinctive natural and cultural values, the integrity of those values, and for its national importance'. Another example, and the focus of the present inquiry, comes to us from Bolivia [...] in Bolivia's case, rights of Mother Earth have significant potential (especially symbolically, but also otherwise) to frame political, legislative and academic debates on ways to confront the persistent anthropocentrism of law that legitimizes and perpetuates the neoliberal development model the world over." Calzadilla, Kotzé, 'Living in Harmony with Nature?', 398–399.

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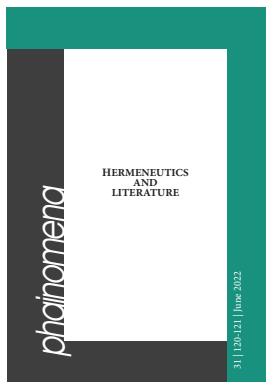
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