

Notes for a sufficient ontological determination of the environment concept based on Heidegger's philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The essay aims to objectively address the environment concept within current's environmental conservation discourse. We delimitate the ontological concept of environment based on the phenomenological evidence provided by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. We intend to indicate that the usual understanding of the environment concept is derived from a more radical experience, which points to the between this surrounding world and human existence. We sought, therefore, to discuss the environmental issue and its fundamental concepts according to Heidegger's existential phenomenology. The bases for this reflection are established in *Being and Time* (and in comments of the secondary literature). In this book, Heidegger explains the concept of environment (*Umwelt*) and its interface with the concepts of world and space. In the same work, the philosopher also calls into question the Environment notion, criticizing the approach of the positive sciences to it. We It can be sustained, with Heidegger, that many of the conveyed understandings within the environmental issue are still treated in a derivative way, which approximates Environment notion to the romantic (particularly with Schelling), and, in that case, naive significance of nature. This paper intends to clarify this concept, freeing it from its ambiguous use, and also to offer notes so that his issue can be revisited with benefits to the environment epistemology issues. This task Justifies itself as an understanding exercise, developed through a brief contextualization of the current terms of the so-called environmental issue, as the idea of "sustainable exploration" will be critically commented. We intend to point out that even the new environmental conservation proposals, operate in an anthropocentric record, In so far as they understand the relationship between humans and the environment from the subject-object dichotomy, present in the Cartesian philosophy and science. Next, we introduce the requirement of a definition of what is to be the environment, in Heidegger's thinking, contrasting these ideas to aspects of the philosophy of nature of F.W.J. Schelling. The text will also outline the discussion about an ethic and conservative posture concerning the environment and its bonds with the dwell, inhabit and responsibility notions.

KEY WORDS: Heidegger, environment, nature, environmental conservation, environmental philosophy

1. Introduction

The issue of our work depends on an introduction of the terms of the so-called environmental issue. This essential theme covers the agenda of scientists, thinkers, activists, environmentalists and politicians of all nations. This is due to observation of the degradation of the environment we live in, a problem brought about by civilization model that relies on consumer relations in the kernel of an economic system governed by capital. This degradation is exacerbated by the action of the technology which, as an apparatus available to the aforementioned socio-economic model, is able to optimize the methods of exploration, production and consumption, besides promoting the satisfaction of the growing needs

engendered within this model, also responding for the its maintenance. In this manner, empowered by an increased the technical capacity to intervene in the environment, extracting its resources, man does more than use them for its livelihood. Man appropriates them, accumulating them in a reserve fund that can be manipulated in accordance to the interest in exploring and storing energy resources, obtain profit, acquire power, or even in the production of the superfluous.

The intensive exploitation of environmental resources soon reveals irreparable harm that in the medium run could jeopardize the survival of man. Even tough examples of these data are widely shown off on the media, it would not be much to remember some here too: the progressive exhaustion of nonrenewable resources such as oil, and deforestation, with the consequent creation of desert spaces, climate and *habitat* modification and depletion of water resources. This concentration of resources generates disorders not only in terms of “nature”. Tensions and conflicts eventually establish themselves in social relations. Disordered demographic and urban growth, excessive waste production, unemployment, poverty, famine and urban violence are just some of the possible symptoms. (Castro, 2001)

Under the impact of the *Second World War*, it has been observed, mainly during the 1960s, greater attention paid to these problems, thus appearing various proposals and initiatives in an attempt to reverse this situation. In many of these, there was no longer the weakness characteristic of earlier approaches to understand the environment and nature in their bucolic sense but the proposal for a “rational exploitation”. This would be aimed at effective actions to reduce the accelerated rate of destruction of still preserved natural resources and to find ways to reconcile *environmental conservation* with *human needs*, including the quality of life. Thus, one could minimize the depletion of resources, using them sparingly, reducing the pace of environmental damage, in order to allow time for nature to act recovering from the damage suffered (Assis, 2001). This way, man’s survival on Earth would be assured. These assumptions about *eco-efficiency* underpin some of the key proposals of sustainable development into circulation.

It is not necessary to proceed much further into this introduction to notice the inconsistencies of these ideas concerning the environment, as, already in the declaration of their intentions, the preservation discourse (which became the flag to various environmental movements) ends up reproducing the logic of consumption when one prescribes: a) *moderate use of environmental resources*, so we can consume longer; b) *systematic use* of resources so that everyone can continue to produce and consume in a greater or smaller degree; c) *limiting the exploitation of the environment* in order to aggress less and less often, so that it has time to recover before being re-explored; finally, d) *a new mode of consumption* to ensure, through the preservation of the intake, the continued consumption. (Assis, 2001) This is sufficient to characterize the speech of conservation as something that is much closer to a control of administrative resources and, therefore, an economy approach, than an ethical stance towards the environment and the development that we achieve from it. This structure that dictates rational exploitation, given the notion of conservation, could be compared to the appeasement policy of the English Chancellor Arthur N. Chamberlain, in the circumstances of the invasion of Poland by Hitler, portrayed in an old cartoon. In the cartoon, the Nazi dictator tries to break the door that separates him from his goal, while Chamberlain just cordially asks “ – *Mr. could you not find a workaround to break the door without breaking the lock?*” (Belmonte apud Aquino, 1996, 68). Similarly, conservation, in the foregoing terms, would not be just a *sustainable degradation*, or parodying the aforementioned charge, something close to a “Could you rape the environment nicely?”

Convinced that this way of behaving towards the problem is due to a misunderstanding of the phenomenon that the environment is, let us begin to environmental issues ambiguous points.

2. Environmental issues and their ambiguous philosophical assumptions

The problems of environmental degradation and the crisis that they introduce can be approached from different directions. For this, we see public policy thinking new strategies to meet the challenges of this framework, science (the same one that develops ways to exploit) mobilized in some of its different sectors to develop new tools through technology, in order to increase the human capacity to solve immediate problems and others on the medium and long terms. However, while efforts add together in favor of this combination, they still seem, for the most part, unclear about their real goals and strategies (Brennan, 2001). An overview of the extensive literature on the subject, indicates that by getting rid of the many repetitions and mannerisms, one faces a much reduced theoretical field (a phenomenon perhaps explained by the relative novelty of the problem), having still some misconceptions and ambiguities. We call ambiguity the situation in which everything seems to have been understood, authentically captured and discussed, when in fact it was not, or the situation which doesn't seem to have been understood, when in fact it was. (Heidegger, 1996) Thus, the redundant expression "*environment*" is a good point to think one of the main ambiguities concerning the task of environmental conservation, not only because, there is much talk about it but little to say, taking it to be obvious, when in fact it is not, but because it refers to fundamental structures involved in environmental issues. Thus, we might ask: *what is environment?* or, *what we mean when we say an environment?*

We said above that the term environment¹ is redundant, because in its Constitution (as originally coined by the French biologist Geoffroy St.-Hilaire in their *Progressive Studies of a naturalist*, 1835), the word itself brings together two terms that could be taken by synonyms, *mean* and *ambience*. Some explanations arise for this redundancy: It is commonly attributed to the term *mean*, a complex relationship between the natural world and living being, influencing its life and behavior. With the same meaning, the environment emphasizes the physical and biological conditions of the natural world and living beings and, in particular in its relations to man. (Birnbacher, 1997) Under both definitions, a key assumption is expressed, the separation between a presumed natural world and man. Thus, we have an entity called nature *on one side* (composed of the ordered sum of all other natural entities) and the man *on the other side*, as essentially distinct things. When pointed out that separation, we aim the perspective in which man understands and relates with the environment. The perspective is the *subject-object duality*, as found in Cartesian philosophy and science.

To the French philosopher Rene Descartes (2003), man is a thinking thing (*res cogitans*) different from other things only extensive (*res extension*), physical. By thinking, man would rule over natural things and make practical use of them in favor of life. However, this use is based on a *reification* of the natural world, consisting of utilitarian deals, which disregard any common thread of this subject with all other entities that are now the objects of their occupation. This dichotomy would support the appropriation of nature as a set of *objects* available as *means to ends*.

Thus,

¹ This observation is due specifically to the Portuguese word for environment: "meio-ambiente". In this word we have the idea of environment doubly registered. Primarily as a *means*, then as *ambience*. Peculiarity that is lost in English and French on whose term comes from another language record.

[t]he earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit. The field that the peasant formerly cultivated and set in order appears differently than it did when to set in order still meant to take care of and to maintain. The work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field. In the sowing of the grain it places the seed in the keeping of the forces of growth and watches over its increase. But meanwhile even the cultivation of the fields has come under the grip of another kind of settings-in-order, which *sets* upon nature. (Heidegger, 1977, 14-15)

That way, trees are used as raw material or fuel, the wind as energy to move mill, the river streams used as the hydroelectric turbines driving force, sunlight turned into electricity by solar cells, etc. Uses, which would be characterized by the Descartes' philosophy project, as ways of elevating the *status* of the subjects to masters and possessors of nature (Descartes, 2003). This project, that was in his view radicalized by the historical influence of two industrial revolutions, inserts us into the previously addressed of consumerism realm, further hindering any evidence of a community between man and its environment. So, considering the total dissociation between man and environment (i.e., between subject and its object) it would be possible to spoil it without any drama.

3. On an ontological determination of the environment

It is possible to enunciate now, based on the foregoing statements, that a particular way of understanding the environment would be responsible for its degrading action. We observed that a disregard of the environment as a game space creates the man's ignorance that it is constitutive of its existence. It is evident the urgency for a clarification of the concept of environment due to an anthropocentric manner with which the environmental issues are addressed, outlining which 'place' man would occupy in this universe. These requirements are formally proposed in *Being and Time* in which the German philosopher Martin Heidegger from the analysis of man's existential condition of *being-in-the-world* says:

The saying used so often today "Human being have their environment" does not say anything ontologically as long as this "having" is undetermined. In its very possibility this "having" has its foundations in the essential constitution of being-in. As a being essentially existing in this way, being-there can explicitly discover beings which it encounters in the environment, can know about them, can avail itself of them, can *have* "world". The ontically trivial talk about "having an environment" is ontologically a problem. To solve it requires nothing less than defining the being of being-there beforehand in an ontologically adequate way. If in biology use has been made of this constitution of being-especially since K.E. von Baer – one must not conclude that its philosophical use implies "biologism." For as a positive science, biology, too, can never find and determine this structure, it must presuppose it and continually make use of it. This structure, itself, however, can be explicated philosophically as the a priori condition for the thematic objects of biology only if it is understood beforehand as a structure of being-there. Only in terms of an orientation towards the ontological structure thus understood, can "life" as a constitution of being be defined a priori in a privative way. (Heidegger, 1996, 54)

With this passage the author tries to accentuate the need for a definition of the way in which man is *in* his environment, since this man on his way of being "has" an environment and, finally, what kind of relationship is at stake in this 'have'. (Foltz, 1995)

To Heidegger man is more than the experience of a subject substantially established in a dichotomy and antagonism to the natural world. In his lifetime, a man would always-be-there, open to the possibilities of a space of relations and of being released in being-busy ways that would provide him conditions for its realization. Thus, man would not be first subject to only then get acquainted with other entities, but rather, he would be a being who, in his environment, takes place there. By reason of terminological affinity with the commented author, we will adopt a term that we intend to think in an analogous manner to the concept environment (*Umwelt*), namely: the world (*Welt*).

When we have a world, for the being-in-the-world, there isn't a relationship of ownership or any accessory condition, but an essential characteristic and, therefore, indispensable. So, according to Heidegger (1975), only as being-in-the-world is human experience possible. For only to exist in a world, this can be. Man, while one that has possibilities, existentially reveals itself as an "open", i.e. as one that becomes since its opening (*Entschlossenheit*) in the world. This opening is not external to the being-there, either superimposed on it, but it reveals the possibilities of its being. Possibility in which the being-there is founded (Heidegger, 1996).

As stated in the citation, the being-in-the-world is *being-in*. However, this "in" should not be understood as the physical notion of "inside ...". For this type of interpretation, at best, characterizes the "relationship" found between two or more extensive bodies. Relationship that could be exemplified by the proposition "the water is inside the glass" or "the books are in the drawer." This relationship can be extended to its imaginable limits, but phenomenologically would not present us more than a relationship of container and contents. Hence, instead of referring to the bodies in that spatial-locative relationship, the "in" of being-in-the-world is concerned with a form in which it always and already is, or, to speak with Heidegger (1996, 51): "(...) the "in" primordially means a spatial relation of this kind. "In" is derived from *innan-*, to live, *habitare*, to dwell. "An" means I am used to familiar with, I take care of something. It has the meaning of *colo* in the sense of *habito* and *diligo*."

The semantic involvement demonstrated here presents us the fundamental distinction between the alleged relationship of the other things in the world and of man in his existential context. All these figures: live, dwell, grow, build, reproduce richer meaning than the mere inwardness. Pointing to be in the world, but not like the fact of simply being given the intra-physical, but in a building of residence relationships (Heidegger, 1978).

In a brief note, we point out that, because of this orientation, even worn down words by academic jargon and the public hype may appear under new direction. Thus, the term "ecology" can be understood as knowledge of the relations with which man lives in his world, building it (once the 'echo' is derived from the Greek '*oikos*': indicates address); the same way: '*habitat*' or '*biosphere*' rather than the mere space occupied by a living organism, can be thought as An indication of a way of being-in-world or being-in-the-environment. (Malpas, 2006)

Man as existing in the condition of being-in-the-world, branches out in various modes of being-in. Thus, in the world, this man was always there with something that relates to the world and that happens in the world. The world is constitutive of man, giving, this way, the existence of this entity. This brief characterization allows us to say that the world is not an objective thing and not a summation of other targeted things. It would also inappropriate to make use of the restricted, but very common, idea that world would be a *whole field*, representing only a limited physical space, within which man and its most diverse

manifestations would fit. Heidegger assures us that the world is neither an "*ontic portrait*" of being innerworldly, nor a mere interpretation of the phenomenon of those entities. To Heidegger (1996), the world is the character of the man himself, covering an entire cyclical significance and relationships, from which it takes its origin, fate and behavior.

With this argument, we find the heideggerian interpretation for the sufficient delimitation of the way of being of the world (environment) in the face of the existential constitution of man. Clearly man as being-in-the-world, is a complex of relations and not something different from his world. Thus, being-in-the-world is his circumstance and relationships that he engenders in the world. Conceiving this way, it would overcome the understanding of the Cartesian subject as one other than the world and perhaps usher in a different way of acting in the environment.

Still in the opening quotation, we witness Heidegger's comment, according to which biology, as a positive science, could not find and determine this ontological structure of the being there's world, but only presuppose it, using it. This statement applies not only to biology but also for all the positive sciences, because these, do not propose, in their projects, to know the inner causes of phenomena, but on the contrary, are concerned with discovering, thanks to the use and combination of reasoning and observation, the effective laws of The phenomena, their invariable relations of success and similarity. (Kahlmeyer-Mertens, 2007) Thus, these modes would be inappropriate to refer to the ontological determination of the concept of world as the environment and the ontological constitution of "life ". To Heidegger, the positive sciences, and even the traditional philosophy (with the residual influence of the Cartesian orientation), on his way to investigate the world, objectifies it in order to understand it as the set of objects or "natural-things" or nature as possessing physical properties subject to verification. Our author identifies in this stance a concern with the determination of the essential constitution of the environment, however:

(...) even if he could explain the pure nature of being, through the fundamental affirmations of mathematical physics, this phenomenon ontology would never reach the 'world'. In itself, nature is a being who comes to meet in the world and that can be discovered, followed by different ways and degrees (Heidegger, 1993, 95).

To Heidegger, these attitudes toward research approach rather than the primary phenomenon in the world, a derivative representation of it, or approaches a being found in the world, the nature. According to the German thinker, the environment, while world, differs in an essential way from what is interpreted as nature, so this is just one entity among many others, subject to an appropriation by an objective person that, with this, has a dichotomous relationship. Nature as an entity is:

Ontologically and categorically understood, nature is a boundary case of the being of possible innerworldly beings. Being-there can discover beings as nature only in a definite mode of its being-in-the-word. This kind of knowledge has the character of a certain "de-worlding" of the word. (...) But even the phenomenon "nature", for instance in the sense of the Romantic concept of nature, is ontologically comprehensible only in terms of the concept of the world; that is, in terms of an analytic of being-there. (Heidegger, 1996, 61)

Accordingly, confusing *world* with *nature* (environment) is to ignore the distinction that further clarifies this concept. Comprehension that would disregard the world as the

constitutive entanglement of man (in his ways, moods, intentions, motivations, goals, occupations, measures to be considered binding relations, referrals, meanings and visions of community with other beings-in-world) to its "de-worlding," conceiving it as another 'thing' capable of being objectively handled, used, consumed, exploited and degraded by someone who understands himself apart and therefore not engaged with this environment. Thus, to assert that the nature can only be grasped ontologically from the concept of the world as seen from the existential analysis of man is the same as to underscore it as a derivative mode of apprehending the world. Derived mode accessible through different ways.

4. Environment and its romantic understanding of nature

Among these ways, the concept of nature finds at the core of modern thought, marked by the dominant idea of the philosophy of subjectivity, another voice that would emphatically mark nature's identity with man (unlike the way Heidegger would see the problem), surpassing the subject-object dichotomy. This is what we saw with the writings of the *Philosophy of nature* F.W. J. Schelling (ideas that we will deal with a synthetic overview, without strict pretensions; pointing to an appropriate unfolding on another occasion).

Schelling (1907) establishes a "common-unity" of man with nature, in that it recognizes this as unconscious subjectivity in development. In this, through the progressive gain of determinations, the living nature would present itself at various stages, and whose ultimate goal would be the highest-conscious subjectivity, i.e. a free nature, self-determined, able to "see itself" as a man. In this development, driven by a productive force, the man-nature takes the position Of a prevailing ordering principle of nature, capable of seeing the world on the unity of nature itself, keeping the accidental distinction, to which nature is unconscious, while he, man is the very nature conscious of itself. These ideas, with emphasis on the experience of community between man and nature are illustrated by the following text:

Like all things and elements of nature, while mere abstractions of the whole, dissolve in the total life (*Allleben*) so the nature - whose image is the Earth and stars, each of which carries in itself divinely all forms and kinds of being - and creations of all elements of the subject must become an ordinary life, higher than the life of each of them in particular. (Schelling, 1907, s/p.)

These ideas of Schelling, according to Hartmann (1993), already in his time were regarded as intemperate in his intuition, being nearer to thoughts of a speculative theologian than a scientific investigator. The adoption of such perspective, for the specialist, would only be exceeded by the romantics, responsible for the rescue of the concept of a deity and Nature's own intangibility. After the presentations that followed, which intended to accomplish the task of an ontological definition of the concept of environment, contextualizing their understanding of nature and unraveling their ambiguities, using the ideas of authors in philosophy, some questions may arise from the clash with the environmental problem: wouldn't these ideas be theoretical reflections about a real problem which is essentially practical, depending more on effective actions than on one "metaphysical" speech? Would not all these ideas be integral parts of a doctrine much closer to poetry and, therefore, unrelated to any commitment to the environment? Would have this speech forgotten man's need to make use of environmental resources, essential to its survival? And yet, to what extent the philosophical approach would be most suitable to contribute to the issue of environment and its preservation?

There is no way of denying man's need to make use of environmental resources. Just as there is an undeniable urgency to develop a model of consumer society that seeks to make good use of these resources, preserving the environment, respecting its biodiversity, while simultaneously defending its economic growth. (Leff, 2006) To create new bases and programs for sustainable development, aiming at their regional suitability, sustainability of its products and emphasizing participatory and citizenship like ways to manage, are apparently more urgent tasks to deal with than the ones presented in this article. For 'environmentalists', its investing in these procedures, which is believed to protect the harmony of man in the environment, providing him with social inclusion as it becomes able to consume to ensure his survival and dignity. Finally, one might think that from these practices we would have one mode of operation that would respect the "ethical" boundaries with the environment, without incurring into a predatory posture.

However, all these practices, products, calculations and plans for ensuring a good acting, would be surface phenomena without understanding that man is his environment. Well, just so we understand that a relationship degrading the environment is degrading himself and all the others that co-inhabit. In this co-inhabit resides the fundamental principle of ethics, not one that oscillates between the humanist discourse, speaking of equality and solidarity and mystical theology, referring to this one primitive sacredness or prescribing him mercy. The ethics involved here, has in the Greek notion of *ethos*, a live in ... a to be familiar with ... a stay in ... so the first step towards an ethical act, in this case is the clarification of the place that man has a house, a reminder of the kind of relations that we used to have in this environment, the recognition that we become familiar with it and, finally, be careful not to lose sight of this community when interacting in this space of achievement. These contributions would be proposed by a philosophical approach, if we understand as Novalis does: "The philosophy itself as a longing for the homeland-earth, an impulse to be everywhere at home" (Novalis apud Heidegger, 1995, 7).

5. Conclusion

The conclusion of this article needs to be given in a summary nature. We found that, usually, the environmental discourse refers to the environment and its preservation in an anthropocentric way. This means that it often given emphasis to the human dimension at the expense of the environment (only possible by ignoring the bond that ties together the existential being-there to the world). The environmental issue is not resolved by a reversal of the premise (i.e., to make a pendulum that would shift the emphasis to the detriment of the human environment). It is necessary to consider the concept of environment in its mode of being. Heidegger's phenomenology allows us to do this, it enables us to treat the environment not just as nature (in a materialist or idealist sense), for the philosopher, the environment is a surrounding world which determines or at least conditions the human existence. To restore such a tie is the first step for us to address issues of environmental preservation and conservation in a truly ethical way. This means that only understanding ourselves as beings-in-the-world with other beings-in-the-world is an environmental discourse that can legitimately be established. These indications are, however, only notes, or even starting points for further reflection.

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