Milieu is a concept that stems from the natural sciences. It is regularly used to describe the state of being of a given setting, predominantly one involving fluids. Insofar as an autonomous subject is not imaginable within a milieu, this use gives a nonhumanistic, even antihumanistic, spin on the idea of milieu when it refers to the social sphere. The concept of milieu thus includes a world model similar to that encompassed by the concept of environment—but even more rigorous. Within an environment a person is still someone in it, with nature or the social world around it. By contrast, “in” a milieu (which literally means “middle” or “medium”) implies that there is no outside and, hence, no inside: A milieu by definition is absolute, extensive, and embracing. It is therefore metasubjective and metaobjective at the same time. Nevertheless, it is not to be thought of as deterministic, for it is no more and no less than a medium, a possibility for events. Speaking of a “creative milieu” is rather tautological, for a milieu per se allows for things to be created and for changes to take place. When introduced into social analysis, however, the idea of creative milieu implies the existence of milieus that are not creative or that were not creative at a certain point in history and geography. In this regard a certain fallacy can be avoided. Even though a milieu is something that can be addressed in time and space, its impact (except in biology) cannot be traced back to the milieu’s natural properties—only to other social and political properties operating at a given time and place. This characteristic is the main insight of geophilosophy as defined by the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (1991/1994), who ultimately follow the concept back to the German writer Friedrich Nietzsche. According to all three thinkers, geophilosophy can be summarized as the idea that philosophy or science in general needs a creative milieu to develop and that this milieu event, though it can be localized in time and space, is not explicable as being caused by the natural features of that specific environment. Identifying creative milieus within the history of science or a geography of ideas is thus not one topic among others but rather the central issue.
What Is Geophilosophy?

Two associations might be made with respect to the term geophilosophy. One is more or less esoteric and has to do with ecological thinking in the sense of “deep ecology” as fostered by Devall (1985). Even though the call to rethink the earth’s value is attributable to geophilosophical motives, this notion is not vital. The second association with geophilosophy can be taken for a philosophical version of “geopolitics.” The term has, in fact, been used in that sense to criticize implied political territoriality couched in a philosophical statement, as when Lyotard (1988/1990) analyzed Martin Heidegger’s writings as a philosophy of the “blood-and-soil” type. Unlike these two interpretations (the ecological and the geopolitical), geophilosophy as meant in this chapter is concerned with the philosophy of geography, of geology, or both and with geography, geology, or both as philosophy. In the one sense, then, geophilosophy centers on philosophy as a philosophy of science; in the other sense, on an apparent nonphilosophical subject as philosophy. This relation can be thought of as dialectical: Insofar as a philosophy of a given science exists, this branch of science has an impact on philosophy.

Philosophy of Geosciences: Nietzsche and the Historical Paradigm

With respect to the science of geography the important historical period was the nineteenth century. In that epoch geography emancipated itself from the science of history, to which it was ancillary, and became established at universities in Europe as a subject in its own right. Geology, on the other hand, has a different origin, coming from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century geognosis. Nevertheless, geology was modernized at the same time that geography became a separate discipline. An important philosophical author relating to these two disciplines is Nietzsche, who is regarded primarily as an ecological or geopolitical thinker. The cliché attached to his name derives mainly from two things: the expression “will to power” and his figure named Zarathustra, who notoriously called upon his disciples to “remain faithful to the earth” (Nietzsche, 1883/1988, Vol. 4, p. 149 and 15). This popular perception of Nietzsche is limited by ideological appropriations of the early twentieth century. Today, his writings are becoming important in a totally different way (Günzel, 2003), for Nietzsche was not only a promoter of catchy phrases, he was also a well-informed reader of the scientific and nonscientific literature of his day. His library was a wide-ranging collection of nineteenth-century research, including anthropology, philology, and natural sciences such as astronomy, physics, chemistry, and, last but not least, geography. Nietzsche is thereby an outstanding witness to historical transformations of knowledge and a forerunner of the “spatial turn” in cultural and social sciences. He did not simply criticize the teleological paradigm of historical thinking; he criticized it with spatial figures of thought and both geographical and geological arguments.