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The Ecological Imperative From the Relationship of Domination to Coexistence

Abstract

The ecological problem has a global dimension. In a radically interconnected world, the ecological issue is closely related to state sovereignty and inequality. Humanity is no longer menaced by an untamed nature, and nowadays danger comes from the same power achieved to dominate nature. This paper reflects on the relationship between the Anthropocene and a specific anthropological view of human beings. The focus is the concept of the Other, assumed in an ontological sense. The ethical issues raised by the ecological crisis require an approach that examines how human beings relate to each other and, consequently, to other living beings. Following a weak adhesion to the D.E. approach, a critique of the philosophical and anthropological assumptions underlying the principle of domination is proposed. The survival of humanity is an object to human responsibility. The aim is to radically criticise the dualistic and rationalistic view of Cartesian origin in which the subject dominates the object for its own purposes. Therefore, the possibility of a transition from a vision that conceives man as subject and nature as object to a perspective in which man and nature are intrinsically interconnected by a relationship of relationality is addressed.

Keywords: Ecology – Anthropocene – Domination – Other – Coexistence

1. The Promethean Man

Among the Platonic dialogues, there is a myth I am fond of. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates and the famous sophist debate on the teachability of virtue. During their conversation, Protagoras advances a heterodox version of the man's creation myth whose protagonists are the titans Prometheus and Epimetheus¹: when the time came for the birth of the mortal species, the gods entrusted Prometheus and Epimetheus with the task of distributing the faculties among the living beings, so that none would be so strong to overwhelm the other. Thus came the distribution of strength or speed, large size or flying ability, fur to resist the cold or hooves to run. During this process, Epimetheus, who was not very shrewd, exhausted the faculties at his disposal, leaving the humans without capacities. Prometheus, realising the resulting risk, decided to give humans Hephaestus' fire and Athena's technical knowledge, so that they could survive. The “*biou sophian*” is technique, or more precisely the ability to perform an activity according to certain skills.

With disarming simplicity, the mythological narrative of Protagoras in the Platonic dialogue tells us that men can never act without technique. Indeed, without it, human beings would not have evolved,

¹ Plato (1956: 18-21).

nor survived. However, technique alone is not enough. There is another core element in the Platonic myth. The effectiveness of technology depends on the existence of a human community: humans survive if they organise themselves into a community. The problem is that human beings are not equipped with the needed technique to create a stable community: the political one. The point is that technical knowledge greatly differs from animals' abilities for a very particular reason, that is the possibility to be used against other humans, against individuals of the same species². And, of course, against other species.

The belonging of technology to humans makes us speak of *homo technologicus*. It is not, though, a new species of human being. Thinking about the appearance of man on earth, Bergson states “au temps où se fabriquent les premières armes, les premiers outils”³. So much so that, if we were not victims of pride, we should say *Homo faber* instead of *Homo sapiens* and think of intelligence as “la faculté de fabriquer des objets artificiels, en particulier des outils à faire des outils et d'en varier indéfiniment la fabrication”⁴. Man has always been linked to technology. In the last century, the topic of the link between human beings and technology came up again and again with increasing insistence. It started to be called a ‘new geological age’, the Anthropocene⁵. This would be characterized by the ability of humans to affect the ecosystem with their activity. The examples that show this capacity are countless and can be macroscopic or microscopic.

Let me now get to what happened on Sable Island, a tiny island off the coast of Nova Scotia. Curiously shaped like a half-moon, it entirely consists of natural parkland and is known for the presence of many horses. These horses were brought to the island in the early 19th century for human purposes. Once humans left the island, the horses remained, became feral and contributed to changing the place environment. The effects of man on the island's ecosystem have persisted over time. And if, coming to our days, Sable Island's only resident, conservationist Zoe Lucas⁶ collects mountains of plastic from the beaches, we can say that humans affected the island's ecosystem by introducing horses well before the explosion of plastics in the sea.

The history of Sable Island isn't certainly a unique event. Alfred W. Crosby, in his famous *Ecological Imperialism*, discusses the expansion of Europeans to other lands. In need of land to cultivate, due to a lack of food, the Europeans had a considerable impact on the ecosystems of the conquered lands. Many native species, plants or animals, became extinct when they encountered the imported ones. As Crosby says, “migrating humans bring their plants and animals with them, and thereby tend to homogenize the world's biota”⁷. What emerges is that the impact on the environment is not simply that of major environmental changes. Humans can make their imprint on the surrounding nature from small gestures. They have the capacity to devastate natural diversity wherever they go. Paradoxically, one could say that we are at the end of the Anthropocene: nature no longer seems able to sustain human development and, at the same time, the human being is overtaken - perhaps overwhelmed - by its own products⁸.

² Cambiano (1971: 13-22).

³ Bergson (2013: 99).

⁴ Bergson, (2013: 100).

⁵ We recall here, by way of example, the use made of it by P. J. Crutzen and E. F. Stoermer at the beginning of the new millennium. See: Crutzen and Stoermer (2000: 17-8).

⁶ Her story is told in a documentary: *Geographies of Solitude* by Jacquelyn Mills, Canada, 2022.

⁷ Crosby, (1986: 81).

⁸ Natoli (2022).

Climate change is one of the most important public topics of the recent decades. Environmental demonstrations in many cities around the world have once again turned the spotlight on the problem. Many aspects of the emergency are in the public domain, also thanks to the constant information and monitoring campaigns carried out by organizations and activists⁹. However, much uncertainty and ignorance concern the effects of global change and the concrete possibilities of solving the related challenges. The crucial point is that climate change cannot be tackled in a sectoral perspective: State sovereignty, special interests and biased approaches do not allow to look at climate change from the necessary all-encompassing perspective. The universality of the problem has a triple root: it affects every human being; it requires a combined approach across disciplines to be solved; it calls for joint action in all involved aspects¹⁰.

The concept of environmental justice has gathered considerable fortune in the last years¹¹. This means that “all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations”¹². This aims to turn on the light on the protection of those who are most vulnerable to the disastrous effects of environmental change and the resulting economic and social inequalities¹³. To do so, it is essential to rethink the concept of progress and technological development and to question individual and collective lifestyles. This process can only take place by adopting an appropriate ethical rethinking.

When talking about the totality of human beings affected by the environmental emergency, one thing must be kept in mind: it is not just a question of how climate change affects, directly or otherwise, the lives of people. Rather, it is about stressing a profound aspect: the relationship between human beings and nature. The idea is that it is not possible to completely understand the environmental issue, nor conceive the due solutions, if one does not start from a critique of the domination paradigm of humans on nature. Only by overcoming this obstacle it will be possible to imagine a new way of dealing with nature, one that allows for the livelihood of humankind.

2. Deep Ecology and Complex Thinking: Two Necessary Premises

Although this paper’s intent is to advance a critique of the dominant paradigm, two fundamental considerations are now needed.

A complex approach is firstly necessary. The disjunctive and simplifying logic must be rejected, as it is incapable of capturing the complexity of the existing relationships. The ecological paradigm itself entails the idea of complexity. This was clear from the origins of the term ecology¹⁴, coined by the German biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel in 1866. Charles Darwin’s pupil, he coined the term inserting it in a footnote to his *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen*. This neologism, created to make

⁹ For illustration purpose only: <https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/>; <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/>; <https://www.overshootday.org/>; <https://livingplanet.panda.org/>; <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/environment-report-1>; <https://www.eea.europa.eu/>; <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>

¹⁰ Blasi, Zamagni (1991); Tallacchini (1996).

¹¹ Brulle and Pellow, (2006: 103-24); Goodman, (2009: 499-514); Robinson (2018).

¹² Definition of Robert Bullard mentioned in Mohai, Pellow and Roberts (2009: 405-430).

¹³ Lo Giudice (2020: 109-127).

¹⁴ The history of ecology is a highly relevant topic. Among the many studies that can be cited: Acot, (1998); Egerton (1983, 1985); Major (1969); McIntosh (1985).

up for the narrowness of the term biology, is made up of the Greek terms *oikos* and *logos*, and literally means ‘house study’. In truth, Haeckel provides no less than five definitions of the term. The most famous, contained in the second volume of *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen*¹⁵, defines ecology as the science of the relations of the organism with the surrounding environment including, in the broad sense, all the ‘conditions of existence’.

A few years later, Karl Möbius identified a term that expresses the compressed interactive relationships between living beings in the same environment: biocenosis. In some way, all living beings are adapted to other beings of the same habitat¹⁶. This means that there is a relationship of mutual co-dependence. Such a relationship also exists between carnivores and their herbivorous prey: if predators exterminated their prey, they would have nothing to eat, starving to death. These relationships between the inhabitants of the same ecosystem are naturally subject to change. Species evolve, and climate changes according to natural processes. If these changes occur gradually, biotic communities can maintain their equilibrium or have time to acquire a new one. With human beings, these changes happen at an extraordinary speed. Technological progress is in a state of exponential acceleration. As a result, human action produces so many radical changes that biocenoses are unable to assimilate them. This can only mean one thing: the death of the biocenosis.

As can be seen, the all-encompassing vocation of ecological science is already evident from the origin of the term. However, in the evolution of the discipline, this complex nature has shared the field with an opposite orientation, the reductionist one. Even today, there still is a debate about the scope of ecological science, whose content is far from useless.

Adopting an ecological point of view means resisting the temptations of reductionism and simplification in order to accept a circular vision in which what counts are precisely the relationships and interweaving between the components of the whole. As Edgar Morin noticed, ecology gives rise to many new problems concerning the relationship between nature and human beings, between nature and societies¹⁷. Unlike the other sciences, which parcel out phenomena and prevent global awareness, ecology raises the problem of the relationship between man and nature in its vastness. Even the philosophy concerned with the ecological crisis must receive the contribution of its various branches: metaphysics, philosophy of nature, anthropology, ethics, economic and political philosophy, the philosophy of history, are all necessary to fully address the challenge posed by ecology¹⁸.

Having expressed the need for a comprehensive approach, it is essential to clarify the philosophical reference perspective. There is a substantial difference between thinking about ecological issues with the common tools of thought or, alternatively, considering them as criteria for rethinking the categories to interpret the world. Arne Naess distinguishes between two alternative approaches to ecological issues: Deep Ecology Movement and Shallow Ecology Movement¹⁹. Despite the risk of oversimplification, this approach has the advantage of emphasizing the existing radical alternative in the environmental issues discourse. Above all, Deep Ecology means assuming that the cognitive and ethical premises of our current way of thinking are inadequate to guarantee the coexistence of nature

¹⁵ Haeckel (1866: 286).

¹⁶ Konrad Lorenz reflects on this in a successful book that will help to turn the spotlight on the problem of the relationship between man and the environment. See: Lorenz (1974).

¹⁷ Morin (1980).

¹⁸ Höslle (1991: 17).

¹⁹ Naess (1973: 16).

and mankind. Adopting its vision allows the assumption of the intrinsic relationality between human beings and the environment. As Naess says: “a person is a part of nature to the extent that he or she too is a relational junction within the total field”²⁰. It is not possible to define man by omitting his relationship with nature; similarly, the definition of nature inevitably includes reference to the human species.

Anyway, the proposed adherence to deep ecology is to be considered weak. I mean that the radical critique of anthropocentrism cannot be accepted. In actual fact, “the assertion of the supremacy of nature conceals within itself the assertion of the absolute sovereignty of spirit, because it is spirit that conceives this primacy of nature and subordinates everything to it”²¹. Postulating the supremacy of nature replicates the spirit’s claim to total dominance, because it is the spirit itself that conceives the supremacy of nature.

Therefore, there is no need to adopt a non-anthropocentric perspective to support an ecological point of view. Although Jonas, in his influential *The Imperative of Responsibility*, attempted to neutralize the anthropocentric datum, every act of observation or evaluation is human in character, and thus makes anthropocentrism inevitable. What is relevant instead is the character of man’s attitude to nature. Rather, the higher human faculties are a source of obligation towards our surroundings. As Norton points out, anthropocentrism can be distinguished according to what value human beings attribute to other living beings. It will be ‘strong’ in the case where the value of other organisms or natural objects is tied exclusively to their ability to satisfy human needs; it will be ‘weak’, on the other hand, in the case where non-human species and natural systems are endowed with value, demand and transformation for humans²². With a weak form of anthropocentrism, it is possible to free the concept of its negative implications and to think of a different human being, one who is not an unchallenged ruler of the world, egotistical and irresponsible, but one who knows how to explore beyond the anthropic in the direction of what is not human.

3. The Principle of Domination

Nowadays for the first time, we have realized that we may be at a tipping point, that the survival of the human species is far from certain. In order to reverse a trend that seems to be leading us to the abyss, a critique of the paradigm of domination is called for. We seem to have reached the point where a self-critique of reason is possible. Indeed, “the antagonism of reason and nature is in an acute and catastrophic phase”²³. Today more than yesterday nature is thought of as an instrument of humans. It appears as “the object of total exploitation that has no aim set by reason, and therefore no limit”²⁴. Humans can dominate nature in a way that has never belonged to any other species. This dominance has many roots. What must be emphasized here is the connection with the dimension of society. The desire of domination is not the consequence of a natural human characteristic, but the result of the

²⁰ Naess (1989: 56).

²¹ Horkheimer (1987: 169).

²² Norton (1987: 12).

²³ Horkheimer (1987: 177).

²⁴ Horkheimer (1987: 108).

structures of society: Nature is an object of man's struggle against man to be exploited to the greatest extent possible.

A fundamental epistemological fallacy lies under these circumstances. Bateson realizes that the point lies in the misidentification of the unit of survival, which would not be traced, as Darwin intended, to the family or the species, but to "organism plus environment"²⁵. This misjudgement would have led to a fatal clash between various species or between one species and its environment, laying the foundation for the opposition between man and nature. Considering, together with this antagonism, human possession of advanced technique, the result will be contrary to the demands of survival: "[the] likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell"²⁶. The dregs of the struggle against nature for its domination will only lead man to his extinction.

If this is the situation, it is imperative to make some considerations about the principle of domination. It is not in my interest to investigate whether the origin of the attitude of domination can be attributed to one tradition of thought or another. The theoretical premises of man's domination of nature are well known: the division between subject and object and the desacralization of nature, which becomes available and manipulable. Rather, it seems necessary to dwell on the relationship between the domination of nature and of other men. It is then possible to think about the contribution of technology from a different point of view. It is true that there is a relationship between the domain paradigm and the changes in technological power. Technology has simultaneously "colonized external nature and has acquired the ability to transform internal nature"²⁷. How Horkheimer keenly writes, "each subject not only has to take part in the subjugation of external nature, human and nonhuman, but in order to do so must subjugate nature in himself"²⁸. Technology has unveiled a self-referential attitude that has produced what many have called the 'technicist fallacy' - you must do what you can do. In this way, technology has found aims in its continuous progress, dangerously disengaging itself from possible other aims²⁹. Paradoxically, man's dominion over nature increases his interdependence with nature. Morin speaks of eco-relation: the more man possesses nature; the more nature possesses man³⁰. This aspect is astonishing in its simplicity: climatic variations, generated by the wicked use of natural resources and our unsustainable lifestyle, cause environmental disasters generating famines, migrations, social and economic crises, and wars. The claim to dominate nature has proven to be epistemologically wrong. Human dominance over nature cannot guarantee human survival. The ecological crisis reveals this deception: it is not possible to dominate reality without suffering its effects³¹.

Nevertheless, it is not technology itself that has brought the human being to this point, but the inherently contradictory nature of the idea of progress. The man of antiquity, aware of his individuality, still recognizes a certain normativity to nature, and does not stand towards it with a domineering

²⁵ Bateson (1972: 493).

²⁶ Bateson (1972: 462).

²⁷ Tallacchini (1996: 19).

²⁸ Horkheimer (1987: 93).

²⁹ Tallacchini (1996: 19).

³⁰ "Mais, réciproquement le contrôle de l'éco-système sue les sociétés humaines s'accroît à la mesure du contrôle qu'il subit. Les variations écologiques provoquent gel, sécheresse, inondations qui déterminent désastres et famines, lesquels suscitent crises, guerres, invasions. Ainsi, la société humaine n'échappe pas à l'éco-relation. Plus l'homme possède la nature, plus elle le possède". Morin (1980: 71-2).

³¹ Bateson (1972).

impulse. He is part of a 'breathing' world. The modern man, on the contrary, is a lone being who looks at nature as an object, an instrument for his interests³². Let's go back to what Horkheimer writes: "the doctrine of progress directly hypostatizes the ideal of the domination of nature and finally itself degenerates into a static, derivative mythology"³³. Of course, the progressive development of technique reinforces the dominative attitude, but it is not at its roots. Rather, the doctrine of progress has forgotten man with its contradictions, its weaknesses and its inescapable coessential status.

The reification and domination of nature also entail reification and domination over humans themselves³⁴. This happens because a vicious circle is established that makes man subject to the disasters triggered by climate disaster. However, the main reason is the existence of a common origin. The disease is the same³⁵. It is not possible to erase domination over non-human species and natural elements unless we radically change the way we look at the other. In this sense, technology may amplify existing problems, but it does not origin them. None of the ecological problems of our time can be solved without profound social change³⁶.

³² A perspective with an apocalyptic tone was described by Günther Anders in his work *Antiquiertheit des Menschen*: man becomes superfluous by the society of production and perceived as inadequate in relation to it. Man would experience 'Promethean shame', i.e., shame for the objects he produces. The "*prometheische Gefälle*" would consist in the gap between man's capacity to produce and his inability to imagine and manage the consequences of his works. Man would live in a pathological situation where he produces objects for determined ends which, however, once achieved, would create further needs and constraints. This gap between what man produces and the ability to make responsible decisions grows more and more as technological capabilities advance. So much so that for Anders, his philosophy is nothing more than a "*philosophische Anthropologie im Zeitalter der Technokratie*", where the diagnosis of the moral inadequacy of modern man, incapable of making responsible choices in production and in his relationship with nature, is central.

See: Anders (1961, 1980); Portinaro (2003).

³³ Horkheimer (1987: 133).

³⁴ Among the many steps that a 'history of the domain' should address, it is worth noting that "even before man embarks on his conquest of man – of class by class – patriarchal morality obliges him to affirm his conquest of woman. The subjugation of her nature and its absorption into the nexus of patriarchal morality forms the archetypal act of domination that ultimately gives rise to man's imagery of a subjugated nature. It is perhaps not accidental that nature and earth retain the female gender into our own time. What may seem to us like a linguistic atavism that reflects a long-gone era when social life was matricentric and nature was its domestic abode may well be an on-going and subtly viable expression of man's continual violation of woman as nature and of nature as woman". Bookchin (2018: 90).

³⁵ "From the time when reason became the instrument for domination of human and extra-human nature by man - that is to say, from its very beginnings - it has been frustrated in its own intention of discovering the truth. This is due to the very fact that it made nature a mere object, and that it failed to discover the trace of itself in such objectivization, in the concepts of matter and things not less than in those of gods and spirit. One might say that the collective madness that ranges today, from the concentration camps to the seemingly most harmless mass-culture reactions, was already present in germ in primitive objectivization, in the first man's calculating contemplation of the world as a prey". Horkheimer (1987: 176).

³⁶ It would be very interesting to devote ample space to the reflections of Murray Bookchin, one of the pioneers of social ecology. In one of his main texts, *The Ecology of Freedom*, he clearly expresses the need for the radical rethinking that ecology demands: "each notion became divorced from a critical analysis of society – from a radical theory of social ecology. It has become clear to me that it was the unity of my views – their ecological holism, not merely their individual components – that gave them a radical thrust. That a society is decentralized, that it uses solar or wind energy, that it is farmed organically, or that it reduces pollution – none of these measures by itself or even in limited combination with others makes an ecological society. Nor do piecemeal steps, however well-intended, even partially resolve problems that have reached a universal, global, and catastrophic character. If anything, partial 'solutions' serve merely as cosmetics to conceal the deep-seated nature of the ecological crisis. They thereby deflect public attention and theoretical insight from an adequate understanding of the depth and scope of the necessary changes." Bookchin (2018: 7).

One aspect deserves special attention. The struggle for survival is certainly not exclusive to human beings. All animal species and forms of life struggle every day for their survival. Man, however, has something peculiar that does not belong to other species. We might call this the “knowledge of death”³⁷. In this knowledge lies an important part of humans’ relationship with nature. Unable to overcome death, man has equipped himself to repel it as much as possible. He has managed to greatly improve his ability to understand it, and then foresee it. It is by this route that the need for knowledge has grown³⁸: to be able to predict and counteract death. In other words, to dominate it³⁹. At the same time, this needs to know gave rise to a virtuous circle in which the desire to know in order to ward off death found a link with the pleasure of knowledge. This generated a self-empowering circularity. Advances in technology have increased the chances of avoiding death. Human life spans have considerably lengthened. This improvement in life expectancy entails an increasing control over natural processes. Man tries in every way possible to nurture his dream of immortality by delaying death as much as possible⁴⁰. But this is well known, it has reached the point where human action to control potential dangers from nature has itself become the main source of danger to human survival⁴¹.

We have observed that the rejection of death is generated by a strong life urge. This desire goes along with another primary emotion: fear. If we look around us, we see many humans engaged in unbridled competition with others – and with themselves. We hurry with ever-increasing haste and not only in view of a possession, material or otherwise, but also because we are moved to the depths by fear. In this race to the abyss, other beings are perceived as obstacles.

One of the greatest political philosophical theories of modernity is built on fear: in Hobbes’ thought, mutual fear is at the basis of the reason why men come together in societies⁴². It is well known how much Hobbesian political philosophy and his anthropological theory have influenced modernity. The Aristotelian idea that the human being is a societal animal is considered by the Leviathan philosopher as hopelessly false⁴³. Humans unite out of fear, which stems from their common desire to harm each other and, above all, from their equality⁴⁴. They are equal not only because they have the same passions – “I say the similitude of *Passions*, which are the same in all men”⁴⁵ – but because of their common fragility. When Hobbes says that men are so equal in strength and mind that the weaker can kill the stronger⁴⁶, he also tells us that men are equally vulnerable. It reminds us how the smallest of

³⁷ Natoli (2022).

³⁸ Natoli (2022: 12).

³⁹ It is interesting to note that the rejection of death is, in a way, completely natural. It is nature itself that generates it: life that desires itself above all else. As Natoli argues, if it were not so, everything would already die at its birth. The impulse towards preservation leads all living beings to the struggle for life. See: Natoli (2022: 13).

⁴⁰ Natoli (2022: 13).

⁴¹ Borges’ words are impressive: “Ser inmortal es baladí; menos el hombre, todas las criaturas lo son, pues ignoran la muerte; lo divino, lo terrible, lo incomprendible, es saberse inmortal”. Borges (2004: 540).

⁴² Lo Giudice (2022)

⁴³ Hobbes (1983: chapter I, II).

⁴⁴ Hobbes (1983: chapter I, III).

⁴⁵ Hobbes (1929: 9).

⁴⁶ Although it is one of the most famous passages in the history of philosophy, it is worth quoting it completely: “NATURE hath made men so equal, in the faculties of body, and mind; as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind the another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as

microbes can exterminate an entire population. It is an extraordinary reminder of human life precariousness.

This awareness of our vulnerability gives rise to a domination desire, at first rising to prevent possible dangers. Survival is an expression of power. Canetti's reflections on the survivor are stimulating in this sense. In the act of surviving everyone is an enemy. In his postponement of death, the human being fully reveals himself: he wants to be there, and to be the only one to be there⁴⁷. The survivor stands in front of the others, standing upright – "der Überlebende steht"⁴⁸. Compared to those who could not win the battle with death, the survivor is privileged. He has the "Gefühl der Auserwähltheit unter vielen"⁴⁹, and breaks the equality of vulnerability, thus producing inequality. Survival can generate satisfaction, a pleasure that can become passion⁵⁰.

This sort of pleasure is expressed in the continuous submission of the other. From fear for one's vulnerability, the survivor moves on to enjoyment for one's being. An unbroken circle follows, in which fear and pleasure are bound together. Desire for survival becomes will to dominate. Within society, this appetite translates into the continuous competition for success, into the law of greed. Not only Hobbes was convinced of this, stating "Competition of Riches, Honour, Command, or other power, enclineth to Contention, Enmity, and War: Because the way on one Competitor to the attaining of his desire, is to kill, subdue, supplant, or repell the other"⁵¹. Rousseau too, in his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, rails against ambition which "inspire à tous les hommes un noir penchant à se nuire mutuellement, [...] concurrence et rivalité [...] et toujours le désir caché de faire son profit aux dépens d'autrui"⁵².

Ambition breeds a condition of competitive fury⁵³. Humans blinded by the desire for success lose touch with what is beneficial. Not only do we lose vision of what is useful for the community and the ecosystem, but also lose the ability to choose something for real individual benefit. The anguish provoked by the alienating desire for social success deprives human beings of their ability to reflect, i.e., "bending something back", stop the mad rush and turn to themselves first and then to the rest. It is by slowing down that the human being can catch a glimpse of all that he seems to have lost. The unrighteous desires of the present prevent people from seeing what would benefit them, not only in terms of immediacy, or individual pleasure, but above all in terms of collective wellness.

4. The Ethics of Responsibility

"Nous vivons dans un monde où rien est à la mesure de l'homme", Simon Weil wrote in the 1930s, "il y a une disproportion monstrueuse entre le corps de l'homme, l'esprit de l'homme et les choses qui

well as he. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himself." Hobbes (1929: 92).

⁴⁷ "Man will nicht nur immer da sein, man will da sein, wenn andere nicht mehr da sind". See: Canetti (1960: 259).

⁴⁸ Canetti (1960: 259).

⁴⁹ Canetti (1960: 260).

⁵⁰ Canetti (1960: 262).

⁵¹ Hobbes (1929: 77).

⁵² Rousseau (1755: 129).

⁵³ Lorenz (1974).

constituent actuellement les éléments de la vie humaine; tout est déséquilibré"⁵⁴. Contemporary life is profoundly disorganised, it has changed its order of magnitude as if "l'homme s'efforçait de l'élever au niveau des forces de la nature extérieure en négligeant de tenir compte de sa nature propre"⁵⁵.

If this is the state of things, what can we do about the ultimatum that earth is imposing us? The exponential growth of man's ability to affect the existence of other living beings through his actions presents humanity with an unavoidable problem. Moreover, trying to tackle the ecological crisis with the same tools that caused it and ignoring the issue of the moral relevance of all life forms is an evasive strategy.

Man is called upon to take responsibility for the consequences of his collective and individual actions, towards other human and living beings, or better, towards the entire ecosystem⁵⁶. We live in the age of the unified planetary civilization, made possible by the technological advances of science. That's why the scope of human actions has acquired a completely new dimension. Far beyond the micro sphere of the family or the sphere of national politics, our actions have global effects. There is a growing gap between the dynamism of technological possibilities, which are expanding uncontrollably, and the tendency for our instruments of control to be inert. Therefore, this requires a universal ethic⁵⁷.

Regardless of cultural and religious, political and legal distinctions, human beings are faced with a common problem. From this point of view, the theme of domination of the other is deeply connected with the theme of common ethics. The idea of a morality which is culturally or territorially bound to the characteristics of a given people is no longer compatible with the extent of the human actions' effects. Today, more than ever, the issue of exploitation and domination cannot be separated from a renewed universal ethical approach.

In accordance with the adoption of the Deep Ecology approach, we must rethink the forms of our living together and our actions towards the ecosystem we live in. The need to rethink the roots of our reciprocity in order to bet on the Other: fear and domination are not the only possible forms with which humans can relate to other living beings.

However, it poses a significant problem. How can we find a universal rational ethics in the age of science? How can we make the necessary ecological thinking compatible with the reductionist idea of neutral, evaluative objectivity?

At this point it is imperative to question certain dogmas that have accompanied the development of human beings over the past centuries. Above all, a concept appeared in the first half of the 18th century and destined for great fortune: positivism. Since its appearance⁵⁸, positivism brought with it

⁵⁴ Weil (1955: 101).

⁵⁵ Weil (1955: 101).

⁵⁶ The topic is among the most relevant in recent decades. See: Apel (1986: 11-52; 1988; 1990: 23-40); Jonas (1978, 1979).

⁵⁷ Clearly, the ethical approach is not unanimous. Niklas Luhmann, for example, considers the ecological issue to be a social communication problem. Ethics would be inadequate because it cannot respond to the climate crisis quickly and with certain ways. For profoundly different reasons, G. Anders also does not embrace the idea of a possible foundation of a universal ethics. Quite apart from the hypothesis arising from the centrality of the apocalyptic vision and the loss of faith in man, the philosopher from Breslau believes that the "*prometheische Gafälle*" has generated a disassociation from the moral universe. This separation is because the potential of technology has made what is possible dutiful – "*das Mögliche durchweg als das Verbindliche, das Gekonnte durchweg als das Gesollte akzeptiert ist*" – and rendered the instrument of ethics perennially inadequate with respect to the normative force of technological progress. An ethics based on principles is impossible because technological production has homogenised the world in the only possible principle: that of performance. See: Luhmann (1986); Anders (1980: 17).

⁵⁸ Saint Simon (1966); Comte (1841).

the idea of the neutral rationality of science. Norms of morality and values have been relegated to the realm of the unreasonable and the private. However, it is the new spatial and temporal dimension of human actions that forces us to question the possibility of a new moral approach⁵⁹. How else can one justify limiting human actions in order to safeguard the existence of unseen human beings, perhaps not even born yet, or other life forms? Similarly, the act of domination of the other can only be countered by recognizing a higher principle than the interest in personal profit.

There are several possible ethical approaches. For example, one can try to argue from individual morality and virtue ethics. This is the direction taken by neo-Aristotelianism, including MacIntyre⁶⁰. Without claiming to enter this debate, I would merely point out how an individual ethical approach may appear deficient with respect to the complexity - in the mentioned above sense - that characterises the ecological question. In this sense, there should be a reflection that goes beyond the individual approach, in order to identify a possible rational foundation of moral ought-to-be.

A different approach that has been very successful is the ethics of responsibility⁶¹. Hans Jonas, author of the famous *The Imperative of Responsibility*, expresses the need for an ethics that can prevent the catastrophe unleashed by “our Promethean power”⁶². The impulse for domination over things and men is pushed towards its goal by the transformation of *techne* into a limitless progressive impulse of the species⁶³. An ethical approach can interrupt this process.

To this end, we must note the reduction of the world to pure actuality affected by modern scientific thought and acknowledge that it is incompatible with a rational foundation of ethical norms⁶⁴. In Jonas’ theory, traditional ethics proved to be insufficient to understand the global effects of new human actions. This is due to the cumulative nature of the effects that exceed the scope of traditional ethics. The cumulative character of the actions effects consists in the fact that the “effects keep adding themselves to one another, with the result that the situation for later subjects and their choices of action will be progressively different from that of the initial agent and ever more the fated product of what was done before”⁶⁵. In order to preserve man and the integrity of his world, in order to be against his

⁵⁹ Although we don’t adopt an intergenerational perspective, the following consideration are largely indebted to the Menga’s (2021) theories.

⁶⁰ MacIntyre (1985); On the Italian scene, Salvatore Natoli recently spoke out in favour of an ethics of virtues in relation to the ecological crisis.

⁶¹ Hans Jonas is one of the most commented authors of the second half of the 20th century. By way of example only: Apel (1997: 3-40); Beiner (1998: 336-54); Berti (1991: 227-31); Birnbacher (1990: 61-80); Depré (1994: 85-108); Dewitte (1996: 9-42); Furioli (2003); Huber (1993: 573-91); Levy (2002); Nepi (2000); Pastore (2000: 109-30); Simon (1993); Vogel (1996: 167-85).

⁶² Jonas (1987).

⁶³ “Now, *techne* in the form of modern technology has turned into an infinite forward-thrust of the race, its most significant enterprise, in whose permanent, self-transcending advance to ever greater things the vocation of man tends to be seen, and whose success of maximal control over things and himself appears as the consummation of his destiny”. Jonas (1987: 9).

⁶⁴ “Ontology has the ground of ethics was the original tenet of philosophy. Their divorce, which is the divorce of the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ realms, is the modern destiny. Their reunion can be affected, if at all, only from the ‘objective’ end, that is to say, through a revision of the idea of nature. And it is becoming rather than abiding nature which would hold out any such promise. From the immanent direction of its total evolution there may elicited a destination of man by whose terms the person, in the act of fulfilling himself, would at the same time realize a concern of universal substance. Hence would result a principle of ethics which is ultimately grounded neither in the autonomy of the self nor in the needs of the community, but in an objective assignment by the nature of things”. Jonas (2001: 283).

⁶⁵ Jonas (1987: 7).

power abuses, a new obligation is developed that corresponds to the concept of responsibility. This requires a change of temporal perspective: from the present to the future.

In the formulation of the ethics of responsibility, an important place is occupied by fear. It is what drives people to responsibility; they understand what is important when they lose something and make it the object of their responsibility. It has an eristic function, only “an anticipated *distortion* of man that helps us to detect that in the normative conception of man which is to be preserved from it”⁶⁶. This fear should not be understood as that irrational fear that prevents action, but as that fear which urges prudent and responsible action. Indeed, it is what motivates human beings to take responsibility as a cognitive condition of the object of responsible action⁶⁷. Since human beings look at technological progress with incurable confidence and do not care about its consequences, fear can open their eyes, especially to the unforeseen and unknown outcomes of technology. Paradoxically, fear is evoked here in the opposite function to what we have seen before. Whereas in Hobbes fear expresses men’s fear for their lives, stands at the origin of the situation of perpetual conflict, and then comes to be the most important political instrument – since it is ineradicable – in Jonas, on the other hand, it performs a diametrically opposite function⁶⁸. He recalls a world that has entrusted science with overcoming fear to the heuristic power of fear.

Responsibility is an exclusive prerogative of the human being. This means that he must be responsible for his fellow human beings and that the mere fact that he can be responsible determines his duty to be so⁶⁹. To Jonas, being subjects capable of acting casually, determines an objective obligation that is expressed as responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions. And responsibility is so inherent to the human being that it should be “included in his definition”, “an ‘ought’ is concretely given with their existence of man”⁷⁰.

Thus, the appropriate moral imperative to the new human action is: “Act so that the effects of your actions are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life”. Or, expressed in clearer terms, “Do not compromise the conditions for an indefinite continuation of humanity on earth”⁷¹. This means that the horizon of the principle of responsibility is the indefinite future, and that “the morality must invade the realm of making [...] and must do so in the form of public policy”⁷². The ethics of responsibility is thus expressly oriented in a global perspective and addresses policy even before individuals. Responsibility extends far beyond the human species as a result of the extension of human

⁶⁶ Jonas (1987: 26).

⁶⁷ “The mere knowledge of *possibilities*, though certainly insufficient for cogent prediction, is fully adequate for the purposes of a *heuristic* casuistry that is to help in the spotting of ethical principles”. Jonas (1987: 29).

⁶⁸ Foddai (2016: 117-35).

⁶⁹ “He [the man] alone can *have* responsibility means also that he *must* have it for others of his like – that is, for such that are themselves potential bearers of responsibility – and that in one or another respect he, in fact, always has it. Here the mere capacity is the sufficient condition for the actuality”. Jonas (1987: 99).

⁷⁰ Jonas (1987: 99).

⁷¹ Jonas (1987: 11); It is interesting to note how Anders reverses this categorical imperative. Consistent with the thesis that the product world has dissociated man from the universe of morality and with the theorisation of the homologising force of technological progress, Anders’ categorical imperative expresses the pre-eminence of technology over man: “*Handle so, daß die Maxime deines Handelns die des Apparats, dessen Teil du bist oder sein wirst, sein könnte*”. An epochal reversal took place, man and objects have exchanged freedom – “*die Subjekte von Freiheit und Unfreiheit sind ausgetauscht. Frei sind die Dinge: unfrei ist der Mensch*”. Anders (1961: 33), (1980: 290).

⁷² Jonas (1987: 9).

power⁷³. Its formulation represented an important step towards the awareness, at least a philosophical one, of the seriousness of ecological crisis⁷⁴.

5. The Ontological and Ethical Possibility of the Other

This very brief and limited excursus on ethics in the age of technology dominance shows, in my opinion, the ‘presence of a lack’. I mean to say that - with reference to the ethics of responsibility - the intention to rationally found ethics in the age of science does not come to full fruition. Or better, theoretical premises are difficult to support due to their strong axiomatic value⁷⁵. Or, perhaps, we never get around to deeply questioning our relational models. In this sense, Jonas’ heuristics of fear raise some questions. Not only because, as said, its effectiveness does not necessarily go beyond a threat that makes one feel an actual danger⁷⁶, but even because it insists on a sentiment that seems difficult to simply direct towards the individual and collective good. Therefore, even if one accepts the wager on an orientation of human passions towards an altruistic direction, at the same time it raises a few perplexities to do so from the exact sentiment that so well explains the origin of the conflict between men, as well as men and nature. Against the destruction of our ecosystem and the subjugation of living beings, human and non-human, we must deeply question ourselves about the relationship that humans have with the other. We must rethink it in the direction of the ontological coexistence of beings⁷⁷.

⁷³ “Now the whole biosphere of the planet with all its plenitude of species, newly revealed in its vulnerability to man’s excessive intervention, claims its share of the respect owed to all that is an end in itself - that is: to all that is alive. [...] It is his excess of power that confers this duty on him, and it is against this very power - that is to say, against himself - that his protection is asked. Thus it comes about that technology, this coldly pragmatic work of human cunning, installs man in a role which only religion has sometimes assigned him: that of steward or guardian of creation. [...] Environmental ethics, really unprecedented, is the expression of this unprecedented widening of our responsibility, which in turn answers to the unprecedented widening of the reach of our deeds”. Jonas (1982: 894-5).

⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the theory is not without its limitations. At the origin of the idea of responsibility is the relationship between parents and children. In this relationship we found “the archetype of all responsible action, which fortunately requires no deduction from a principle, because it is powerfully implanted in us by nature” Jonas (1987: 39). This is because the parental relationship is traced to that case of non-reciprocal responsibility. It constitutes the example through which it can be argued that a non-reciprocal responsibility for the future is possible. It is not difficult to see how, to this day, this derivation is at least problematic, especially for those who seek to work for a world that breaks free from seeing parenthood as a principle “powerfully implanted by nature”. Moreover, this reference to the model of parental responsibility seems to contradict the observation that traditional ethics is insufficient to deal with the global effects of human action. A further contradiction seems to appear when Jonas bases responsibility for the totality of living beings on the debt that human beings owe to nature as they are ‘generated by her’, thus overturning the principle of parental responsibility. Jonas (1987: 99). About this, interpreting provocatively, K.-O. Apel believes that the rejection of the principle of reciprocity and its universalization to the entire human race may expose the imperative of responsibility to the objection that it can also be satisfied by racist ethics. See: Apel (1988: 196; 1991, 1994).

⁷⁵ In Jonas’s construction, being is taken as something that has value, as that which is an end in itself. By this I mean that there are two axiomatic premises in the theory, namely the recognition of the teleological structure of being and the ontological axiom of the superiority of purpose over aimlessness (“In purposiveness as such [...] we can see a fundamental self-affirmation of being, which posits it absolutely as the better over against nonbeing. In every purpose, being declares itself for itself and against nothingness”). It is from them that man’s obligation to act for the preservation of being derives.

⁷⁶ Foddai (2016: 129); Nussbaum (2001: 51); Pulcini (2009: 173).

⁷⁷ See: Porciello (2022).

To achieve this, the disturbance of the balance between the forms of human rationality must be overcome. As Höhle points out, the exponential development of technical rationality is accompanied by a regression of the value rationality⁷⁸. This gap makes it legitimate to question whether the technological knowledge of our time can be called progress or not. Rather, we should speak of decadence. The human being is deceiving himself about his triumph. Uncritical technological progress is leading the human being towards defeat. By dominating nature and other living beings, man ends up dominating himself. Even if a human being was able to subjugate the whole of nature and the entire human race to himself, he would be a loser. He would deprive of the possibility of defining himself through the other, finding himself in him, his own subjectivity would be lost⁷⁹.

A possible different approach, that looks more closely at the relationship between living beings, could result from the concept of the *pleroma*⁸⁰. I mean the literal sense of the term: fullness, or better, the fullness of being. A pleromatic vision embraces being, whether human or non-human, in its various dimensions: material-natural, historical-cultural, personal-collective, rational-spiritual. Accepting and recognizing being means rejecting the domination of the other and the will to own arbitrary disposition. However, it does not mean passivity and surrender. It means guarding, taking care of the other. This mutual custody is not only directed towards all dimensions of present, human and non-human beings, but also towards possible and future ones. This requires overcoming simplifying disjunctions and adopting complex, recursive thinking.

The dominion of nature is accomplished in its full availability, thought of as an object. The apex of technological progress dominating attitude is when the object can be indifferently produced and destroyed. We may say that it is at the absolute disposal of nature. Being available, the dominated thing/object is an infinite oscillation that traverses the distance between being (production) and nothingness (destruction, but also non-production)⁸¹. The object is therefore the prey of the man who decides with full disposal of its essence. Based on this consideration, the only way to save something from absolute domination is to remove it from availability. Jonas is aware of this, and in fact devotes ample space to refuting the idea that nature can be freely manipulated by humans⁸². The crucial point is: is it possible to take nature away from human availability? Can this happen before humans realise that they have irreversibly compromised the ecosystem and their and other species' chances of survival? Assuming that the point of no return is not yet passed, would this awareness be sufficient? On closer inspection, shouldn't this awareness already exist, radically affecting our life patterns?

To speak in terms of the *pleroma* implies revisiting the essence of being in its fullness. This can lead to a different approach in the relationship between being and otherness. Moving from a perception of the other as an object in my availability to that of the other as something that contributes to self-definition and belonging. "Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persevere in its being"⁸³, argues Spinoza. The concept of "striving" can open a way towards a co-existential foundation. In fact, it includes both the impulse to expand being, which is essential to life, and the resulting resistance.

⁷⁸ "Dieses Mißverständnis zwischen Zweck- und Wertrationalität liegt dem modernen technologischen Zeitalter zugrunde". Höhle (1991: 44).

⁷⁹ "und wie einem metallenen Spiegel würde er erkennen, daß seine zu einem Punkt zusammengeschrumpfte Subjektivität ebenso tot wäre die unermessliche Welt der Objekte". Höhle (1991: 59).

⁸⁰ Vallauri (1990: VII-XCVIII).

⁸¹ Severino (2010: 222).

⁸² Jonas (1987).

⁸³ Spinoza (1954: VI)

This resistance is not only due to the limited possibilities of its strength, but also to the encounter with the other's efforts. The *conatus* does not only express the coherence that the living organism maintains despite circumstances that continually expose it to risks⁸⁴. The persisting effort to be could not exist without the other's limitation. It is no more than a shift in the point of view: from the effort seen as the resistance that the individual opposes to external change, to the recognition of the existence of something that, straining itself, encounters resistance from the other. Efforts meet and limit each other. This means that the other is fundamental to the definition of my being, which cannot exist without the "other" limiting it. The other is what I inevitably encounter in my existence. And without it I could not progress in existence.

Now, bearing in mind the need to adopt complex thinking (and acting), there is the possibility of finding a rational ethics from this interpretation of the other. Saving the world and all living beings from the blind fury of domination will be possible only if we radically question our way of looking at things. Thinking of the other as essential for me to exist, not only factually but ontologically, provides, perhaps, a chance for the ethics of the future. When we ask ourselves 'why should we feel responsible for the preservation of the ecosphere, for the survival of other living beings, or for the existence of the next human generations' we might answer: because without the Other I do not exist.

- *¿Y qué pasará con las ballenas que quedan?*
- *Se irán [...] hasta que les acabe el mundo –*⁸⁵

⁸⁴ These issues have been addressed with a neuroscience perspective by Antonio Damasio. See: Damasio (2003).

⁸⁵ Sepúlveda (2005: 139-40).

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