

THE ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE AND MODERN RATIONALITY

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- **ABSTRACT:** This essay explores the complex relationship between human reason and the environment within the historical trajectory of modernity. Starting from the Renaissance notion of perspectival space as a symbolic form of rational order, the study traces how modern reason – through science, law, and politics – progressively detached humanity from the natural world, transforming it into an external, controllable environment. The work examines the consequences of this epistemological and cultural separation, from the Enlightenment project of emancipation to the technoscientific rationalization of life and production. In the face of today’s ecological crisis, the essay proposes a critical rethinking of environmental issues through relational and interactional paradigms drawn from contemporary sociology, quantum physics, and anthropology “beyond the human.” It ultimately advances an ethical perspective based on hospitality, reciprocity, and responsibility – an *ethics of responsiveness* that reopens the dialogue between human and non-human subjectivities, restoring to the world its original sacredness and ambivalent vitality.
- **KEYWORDS:** Modern reason; environment; sociology of concepts; ecology; semiotics; ethics of hospitality; subjectivity; interaction.

QUESTÃO AMBIENTAL E A RACIONALIDADE MODERNA

- **RESUMO:** Este ensaio investiga a complexa relação entre a razão humana e o meio ambiente ao longo da trajetória histórica da modernidade. Partindo da noção renascentista de espaço perspectivo como forma simbólica de ordem racional, o estudo analisa como a razão moderna – por meio da ciência, do direito e da política – progressivamente desvinculou a humanidade do mundo natural, transformando-o em um ambiente externo e controlável. O trabalho examina as consequências dessa separação epistemológica e cultural, desde o projeto iluminista de emancipação até a racionalização tecnocientífica da vida e da produção. Diante da atual crise ecológica, o ensaio propõe uma releitura crítica das questões ambientais a partir de paradigmas relacionais e interacionais inspirados na sociologia contemporânea, na física quântica e na antropologia “para além do humano”. Por fim, apresenta uma perspectiva ética baseada na hospitalidade, na reciprocidade e na responsabilidade – uma ética da responsividade



que reabre o diálogo entre subjetividades humanas e não humanas, restituindo ao mundo sua sacralidade original e sua vitalidade ambivalente.

- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Razão moderna; meio ambiente; sociologia dos conceitos; ecologia; semiótica; ética da hospitalidade; subjetividade; interação.

1. Introduction

Starting from the last decades of the previous century, the environmental issue has increasingly catalyzed sociological debate, raising problems mainly connected to the theme of sustainability. Topics such as pollution, climate change, greenhouse gas emissions, loss of biodiversity, soil, water, and air degradation, as well as the growth and intensification of already existing economic and social inequalities, have drawn renewed attention in approaches and research aimed at rethinking the precariousness of the human condition.

Some of the most perceptive sociologists, considering the phenomenon of the “globalization of risks” (no longer attributable solely to the sphere of national policies), have focused their attention on a condition of uncertainty that, now extended to the borders of planetary “civilization,” seems to encompass the entire globe. In view of the crisis of the nation-state – increasingly besieged by ecological, economic, and health risks linking together the once separate worlds of underdeveloped, developing, and developed countries – the need has been felt to reformulate a “sociological cosmopolitanism” founded upon a factual presupposition elevated to a universal assumption: the exposure of all humanity to globalized risks (Habermas, 1996; Beck 2002, 2004; Beck; Grande, 2004; Giddens, 1990).

Elsewhere, a necessary transition has been invoked toward a more sustainable future characterized by the search for adequate solutions to the various environmental criticalities mentioned above. From this perspective, the environment – a fundamental element in systems theory (one need only think of Luhmann) – has become, about the issues just evoked, a reservoir of investigation for other theoretical constructions that, particularly in recent times, have animated sociological studies.

Precisely based on such reflections, this work will focus on the relationship between humans and the environment, redefined through spatial coordinates along an aesthetic path that, on the (morphological) plane of art (as the aesthetic configuration



of space), intertwines law, economic reason, and political thought. It is thus a path that, taking its initial cues from the theoretical strength of *visual thinking* (Arnheim, 1969), will attempt to formulate, in critical terms, a “sociology of concepts” capable of bringing the environmental issue back to the margins of the “process of conceptualization” stimulated by the development of modern reason.

2. From the Renaissance Perspective to juridical and political space

We may define perspective space as a dimension that adjusts objective proportions to the subjective requirements of a “universal,” “rational,” and “intellectual” vision; a space that, in the transition from an “ontological” to a “methodological” conception of perception, allows the “observing subject” to visualize, produce, rationalize, and order reality from an “external” point of view. The conception of the human being as ‘subiectum’ situated within the world is replaced by that of a subject conceived “outside” the world, capable of correctly constructing reality starting from his or her own “sovereign” perspective.

In this sense, the practice of Renaissance perspective – closely connected to the development of science – bears witness to the changing function of subjectivity in relation to reality and its representation. Perspective is not merely a pictorial technique of representation that makes it possible to reproduce the third dimension, namely depth, within a two-dimensional image; it is also a scientific conception of space (and of the world), a “rational” way of constructing space and reality from an external “gaze,” from a “point of view” attributable to a subject objectified in his individuality. It is a method for organizing and ordering reality from an individual, universal, and absolute “position,” one that would later be occupied, respectively, by the sovereign (on the political plane) and the legislator (on the juridical plane), capable of “depicting,” from above and from without, a normative order of social relations.

All this points to a new “mentality” that can be discerned behind the “reborn” humanistic sensibility. We may in fact consider the geometrical idea of perspective (as a system – derived from Euclid – of proportional reduction of objects according to distance) as a “symbolic form” (Panofsky 1927) that effectively defines the mental style of an era (Francastel, 1965). It is a cognitive “convention” (albeit grounded in the optical system), a process of mathematical rationalization (a geometrical model of



representation operating according to the laws of mathematics rather than those of physiology), a “cultural choice” that develops precisely at the moment when imaginative processes – as in the Italian Renaissance – are directed toward positive knowledge and translated into institutionalized, universal “laws.”

It is therefore true, as Arnold Hauser reminds us, that “the perspective of fifteenth-century painters is a scientific conception”; but even truer is the other side of this reading: “Kepler’s and Galileo’s universe is, ultimately, an aesthetic vision” (Hauser, 1955; Italian translation 1984, I, p. 360).

Already in the first half of the fifteenth century – as Evdokimov observed – in the Christian world of the West, painters such as Cimabue, Giotto, Taddeo Gaddi, and Duccio da Buoninsegna, influenced by scholastic intellectualism, had distanced themselves from that mystical and invisible reality still expressed in the liturgical rule of the Eastern icon (the art, par excellence, of the “transcendent” and the “sacred”). By introducing the observer’s gaze as a structuring element of the painting – by giving a “visual form” to space and offering lines of depth in representation (as well as optical realism and *chiaroscuro*) – their art broke with the “iconographic canons” established by the Church of the East and thus asserted its independence from ritual. From this moment on, Western pictorial vision, increasingly “subjective” (and increasingly subject to “individual psychic transports”), could no longer find integration within the “liturgical mystery.” The artwork gradually lost the language of symbols and the power of “invisible presences”: from “sacred” it became a mere “religious representation” (Evdokimov, 1972; Italian translation 1990, p. 173).

However, it must be remembered that the art of perspective was not a Renaissance invention that emerged from nothing. Research conducted by Hans Belting has shown that at the basis of this pictorial construction – the same foundation through which sensory perception became knowledge – lay a theory of Arabic origin: a mathematical theory of visual rays and the geometry of light, a scientific concept of optics attributable to a treatise by Alhazen (Abu ‘Ali al-Hasan Ibn al-Haitham), *Kitāb al-Manāẓir* (*Book on the Theory of Vision*), written in 1028 and translated, presumably in Spain around 1200, under the titles *De aspectibus* and *Perspectiva* (Belting, 2008).

From this point on, the (Arabic) theory of vision was transformed, especially with Leon Battista Alberti, into a (Western) theory of the image: not only things, but also “empty space” could be measured. On this basis, visual perception became the paradigm of intellectual clarity. The way in which we see acquires intellectual value:



through it, we intellectually construct the real. The “new man,” by valorizing “subjectivity” and emancipating himself at the same time from “ontology,” begins to prefer “the search for truth to truth itself and methodology to knowledge already achieved” (Florenskij, 1995, p. 124). He no longer derives the “norm” from the “perfection” of a reality objectively conceived but assumes himself as the “norm” (and measure) of all reality (and, in this sense, normatively produces the real, legislates).

These are the terms Florenskij uses to describe the “mentality” sustaining the “monocular subject” (“fixed on his throne”) in Renaissance perspective vision: “transcendental reigning subject,” “monarchic point,” “king and legislator” (Florenskij, 2003, pp. 124-5); terms belonging to juridical and political vocabulary, yet perfectly suited to characterize the artistic experience of fifteenth-century Italy.

Remaining on the juridical plane, we cannot fully understand the process of formation of the modern state without historically considering the particular relationship between juridical order and the centralization of political power which, as Paolo Grossi has demonstrated, marks the slow emergence of a new sovereign political subject: the modern Prince – absolute legislator, sovereign released and detached from the social chains of feudalism, conceivable “within a vision of political power as an all-encompassing authority increasingly complete and developed against every form of social and juridical pluralism” (Grossi, 2001, p. 29). It is only from this moment on, in fact, that law becomes a norm capable of self-legitimizing as “law,” as the volition of a sovereign subject. Like the individual-subject of perspectival representation, the new political subject of modernity (“an individual of absolute insularity”) becomes the “absolute legislator” of the nascent spatial and territorial order – a principle “external” to the social world. Law contracts into statute (into authoritarian command, sovereign volition), and “objective” reason (ontic, normative, inscribed in the nature of things, realized in a preexisting order) gives way to a “subjectively ordered” reason – that is, a will (singular and abstract, though no less universalistic) detached from all objective constraint.

Through the authoritative perspective of the Prince’s will (of the new sovereign subject), law can now order social relations “from above,” according to a “subjective” reason freed from its objective (ethical and social) contents. We are at the origins of modern individualism, at the threshold of that historical (and anthropological) process aimed at liberating the individual – now conceived in his abstraction and moral artificiality – from the bonds (and privileges) in which feudal society had placed him.



The realization (and visualization) of this new subjectivity allows, paradoxically, the individual – the sovereign subject – to be placed at the center of the modern social order in all his “eccentricity” with respect to social relations: a “decentered,” “displaced,” “external,” “separate” individual, yet situated at the center of the new political and social order, as well as at the foundation – as the ordering principle – of the new dualistic system of thought that would find theoretical formulation especially in Cartesian philosophy. The individual, detached from the environment, thus becomes its organizer, its regulating principle.

3. The Project of Modern Reason

From this point of view, the world – whether social or natural – presents itself as an exterior environment (external to the individual subject), as an objective space that can be ordered and controlled by a politically and scientifically rational form of knowledge.

Indeed, the project of Modern Reason has been, since the Renaissance, on the one hand, to emancipate intelligence from cultural or biological limits not reducible to scientific calculations of pure rationality, and on the other, to construct an abstract and universal social order that could be organized, designed, and controlled according to mathematical calculations rigorously abstracted from historical contingencies. In the process of intellectual “enlightenment” that, from natural law theory, led to the Enlightenment (in its most radical forms), reason – through an “ascetic” movement aimed at liberating and emancipating humanity from the structure of feudal privileges – ended up presenting itself as an abstract, pure, formal, universal dimension (Kant), detached (“ab-soluta”) from any particular historical-social context and indifferent to any content or value not referable to the very principle of reason itself.

Already after the French Revolution, within the social sciences, Comte rethought its function by assigning it to a “positive” knowledge capable of understanding, through calculative thinking (modeled upon technical power), the progressive development of order; capable, therefore, of “controlling” the processes of the real becoming of the social world: “Thus, the authentic positive spirit consists above all in seeing in order to foresee, in studying what is, in order to conclude what will be” (Comte, 1844, Italian translation 2001, p. 61).

Knowledge that “observes,” “arranges,” “regulates,” and “controls” thus becomes the model of inquiry that opens the way to the “political” domination of



“technoscience,” the complex of scientific knowledge applied to technology; it becomes a “technique for the domination of life” (Weber 1919, Italian translation 1948), “a means to achieve an end” modeled on industrial production (Simmel, 1902).

If, in premodern times, one could still believe in the finiteness of humankind before the infinity of the world, modernity has bequeathed us the idea of the infinity of human beings with respect to the finiteness of the world (Serres, 2009, Italian translation 2010, p. 36). As “individual subjects,” we have become infinite – in reason, in desire, in power – before a finite nature.

But there is more: at the apex of the paroxysmal process of modern rationalization, we have reached a paradoxical point of reversal – an essential inversion that characterizes the relations of production within industrial society. The sovereign subject (the expression of the Renaissance *homo faber* and of the bourgeois individual of modernity) now appears to be subordinated to the “products” of his own production. With the technological progress that has accompanied the intellectualization of life initiated in modernity, the rational-mechanical world has ended up becoming autonomous and independent of human beings. “In the end, we depend on the things that depend on us” (*Ibid*, p. 40).

We are increasingly dependent, indeed, on a world of production for which we are only partly responsible. This is the paradoxical circulation of domination: the premises of liberation in Enlightenment reason end up producing new forms of oppression and alienation (Horkheimer; Adorno, 1944-1969). Modern Enlightenment, complicit with the capitalist mode of production, did not fully realize reason; rather, through a process of purely abstract and self-referential economic and social organization, it fostered the work of a “distorted” rationality that no longer takes human beings into account.

Today, however, the problem is not only to point out the exploitation of man by man, or to denounce – through the analysis of alienated labor – “man’s estrangement from man” (Marx, 1964). Marx himself, given the conditions of the working class in the industrial world of his time, was primarily concerned with denouncing the exploitation of human beings, leaving in the background the exploitation of the environment (the transformation of inorganic nature through labor). Now, instead, the task is to rethink the world reduced to inert and passive matter, as a feature of an exploitation no longer sustainable for humanity’s own survival. The issue of emancipation thus gives way to the problem of dependence on a world that can no longer sustain us (Latour, 2022, Italian translation 2024).



Freed from nature, humanity not only remains suspended on the brink of its own annihilation but finds itself paradoxically under the domination of – and dependent upon – its own artifacts, which acquire a degree of autonomy and independence: all the more so today, with the production of “intelligent” artifacts capable of delegating to machines functions once controlled by humans.

This domination, aligned with the inexorable process of modern rationalization, ultimately confirms an idea of reality as something entirely orderable and controllable through technological processes. We are increasingly immersed in the infosphere. We increasingly share our experience of the world with artificial agents – algorithms or robots alike (Floridi, 2022). Yet we have also realized that we remain immersed in a “natural” reality not devoid of risks and dangers for human beings.

The Covid-19 pandemic has, in fact, taught us that viruses – invisible to the eyes and other sensory organs – are a constitutive part of our natural environment, with which we have long been in perpetual struggle (for survival). Here lies the ambiguous pharmaceutic logic of the “remedy-poison”: the more we find remedies to the continual challenges that nature poses to us, the more we spread poisons. Technology protects us, but it is, at the same time, an instrumental power that, in its progressive development, inevitably subjugates us and exposes us to innumerable other risks.

4. Rethinking the environmental issue

In recent times, considering the problems raised so far, numerous theoretical and practical approaches have emerged aimed at problematizing our situation in the world and at formulating, on epistemological, political, juridical, and ethical levels, new critical perspectives for study, research, and action. It is not possible here to consider all the various (scientific and ideological) positions that have appeared in the recent debate on environmental issues. However, a few of them deserve mention before we attempt to reconsider, ourselves, how to address the problem.

Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish activist, has drawn the media’s attention to the environmental risks threatening the survival of future generations. Her perspective is a political one, yet fundamentally imbued with a kind of “religious fervor” (Badiou, 2022, Italian translation 2023, p. 73). Indeed, Badiou – reflecting on Greta’s activism – has observed that the destiny of this “ecological preaching” fails to reach the true source of the problem: globalized capitalism, exempt from any form of control or



effective repression. His alternative proposal, therefore, is inspired by a communist praxis oriented toward anti-capitalist political conflict rather than toward religious “ecumenism,” and entrusted to popular committees: “Ecology will be effective only to the extent that it unfolds within a communistic context of control over productive practices” (*Ibid.*, p. 73).

An equally “political” position – though rethought on an epistemological level – is the one sustained by Latour. Ecology, according to him, is conceived from an “ecopolitical” perspective as a “new class struggle” carried out by “geosocial classes” sharing common interests (Latour, 2024, p. 31-37). The current consciousness of the “ecological class” represents “the new rationality,” and the new process of “ecologization” is irreducible to modernization (the dead end of the civilizing process), precisely because it takes into account “the fundamental problem of the conditions of habitability of the planet” (*Ibid.*, p. 34).

The issue thus becomes one of “habitability”: we do not live outside the Earth. Through the notion of “ecoclass,” the ecological question enters politics, promoting a conception of the environment as a lived and shared space inhabited by all living beings – not only by “speaking subjects,” but open to the diverse modes of existence with which we humans enter into relationships of action and “reaction.”

Indeed, for some time now, theorists of sustainability and, more broadly, scholars engaged in environmental issues have sought to rethink the reciprocal relationship between human beings and the rest of the universe. The condition of our survival – wrote Latouche – lies in the reconstruction of a harmonious and reciprocal relationship with nature. “By eliminating the regenerative capacity of nature, by reducing natural resources to raw material to be exploited instead of ‘drawn from,’ modernity has eliminated this relationship of reciprocity” (Latouche, 2006, Italian translation 2007, p. 13-14).

Here again, the problem is identified with the process of modernization, which has “disenchanted” our relationship with the world. *Homo oeconomicus* – the principal architect of modernity’s predatory project, the champion of unrestrained neoliberalism, the promoter of “overgrowth” – is the chief culprit in this situation. The only remedy, then, must be sought in “degrowth,” the radical antidote to infinite growth on a planet with limited resources.

Nonetheless, the environmental issue has also given rise to other theoretical perspectives, particularly those focused on rethinking the “global” level of our condition



(and interconnection) on a planetary scale. Assuming a position at once ethical, political, and epistemological, Serres has warned us: “We are incurring the revenge of the things of the world – air, sea, climate, and species – less passive than we believe, less objective than we wish, less servile than we dream” (Serres, 2009, Italian translation 2010, p. 70). The need to “sign” a new “natural contract” (*Ibid.*, p. 73) is thus becoming increasingly urgent. Politics – now global in scope – must open dialogue with a “third” subject: nature, the world, the Earth; a subject without a voice, but one that nevertheless demands to be heard, not as an “object” but as a “speaking subject.”

And who speaks in the name of this “third”? The spokesperson for nature and the world is still today science – ever more invoked to lend legitimacy to political choices – which must be entrusted with a guiding role. A reversal of course is thus required: it is no longer technical power that calls upon science for its political ends, but politics that must contain technology (through juridical regulation) in order to restore to science a role that is not merely instrumental.

5. Relations, interactions, processes

Among the various positions concerning the environmental issue, we have selected only a few, ranging from the religious, political, and juridical levels to the epistemological and ethical. What can sociological theory draw from these perspectives?

Starting from the approaches briefly presented above, we can begin to rethink an ethically oriented relational theory based on epistemological premises capable of reconnecting our existential condition to its essential relationship with the world within which we dwell.

Much of sociology, particularly since Simmel, has sought to understand social behavior by focusing its attention on the concepts of relation and interaction. Today even the natural sciences – especially contemporary physics – have posed the question of natural phenomena in these same terms. Consider quantum mechanics, described as a “non-objective physics,” not founded on objects but on interactions: “The relationship at the basis of quantum theory is that between observers of complementary quantities, and what is studied is the effect of this relationship on the basic interaction between experiment and system, which persists during measurement” (Finkelstein, 2003, Italian translation 2024, p. 124). It is no longer a matter of defining entities by their state (“ontically”) but of defining them in terms of our actions upon them (“practically”).



Thus, “reality” is replaced by “actuality,” allowing us “to empty a concept of its essence, making us more aware of how our knowledge of the concept is generated by our own actions” (*Ibid.*). Quantum theory relativizes the “state” understood as absolute. The “is” is replaced by a “does”; “essences” by “relations” and “relativity” (*Ibid.*, p. 150).

A similar perspective is, in part, shared by analytical theories and procedures in the field of neuroscience and the sciences of mind. Minsky, for example, recalling that the mind works with cerebral models of the world, emphasized that every sensation is nothing in itself but exists only in relation to other sensations (Minsky, 1986, Italian translation 1989, p. 209). One might also think of Bateson’s work on the “ecology of mind”: the understanding of relational dynamics, interactive processes, and patterns of human thought is based on the premise that if mind and environment are realities intimately intertwined, their comprehension requires an analysis of the contextual relations in which they operate and of the broader ecosystem of which they form an integral part (Bateson, 1972).

From the side of the study of mind (as in the perspectives opened by quantum physics), the “relational” and “interactional” model thus becomes the fundamental element through which to reformulate, on an epistemological level, an “ecological” theory of knowledge – one capable of yielding important repercussions on ethical and political planes. Forms of interaction, understood as “relations of reciprocal dependence,” can, in other words, suggest a new way of conceiving the relations between human beings and the environment, between human beings and other “thinking entities.” They can open new scenarios suitable for understanding a different way of conceiving “inter-subjectivity” among all living beings (not only “speaking subjects”).

A significant step toward this conception was made, in the field of biological studies, by Godfrey-Smith, who showed how experiences and other cerebral processes give rise to various forms of subjectivity, to “different ways of being a subject,” traceable to the style and life circumstances of an animal (Godfrey-Smith, 2020, Italian translation 2021, p. 250). In this sense, it can be said that other beings inhabiting the planet possess subjective experience, a “sense of self,” and act as selves. We are thus invited to take seriously “the idea of different types of subjectivity, which might carry with them differing practical and ethical consequences” (*Ibid.*, p. 254). We are also invited to understand “wild nature” (living, free, vast, vigorous, dynamic, diversified, complex, rich in interactions, and beyond human control) as an environment that



[...] requires numerous kinds of living creatures bound together in a system of more or less intense interactions, characterized by fluctuations dependent on the almost unlimited unpredictability of individual behavior and the limited predictability of biophysical and biochemical laws (Quammen, 2023, Italian translation 2024, p. 15).

Here again, it is a matter of considering the bonds and interdependencies among living creatures and their physical environments. We have always been an integral part - through connections and processes of interaction - of the biosphere (which continually exposes us to relations with entities and “subjectivities” other than ourselves).

To better understand this living universe of interactions and interconnections, we need to recalibrate, along the lines set out above, the ethical margins of a new ontological and, at the same time, epistemic turn.

Recently, after years of fieldwork in the Upper Amazon, anthropologist Eduardo Kohn has proposed an “anthropology beyond the human,” understood as “learning to recognize how the human being is also the product of what lies beyond human contexts” (Kohn, 2013, Italian translation 2021, p. 63). The issue, besides being of epistemological interest, is essentially ontological. Every living being is a “self,” a being capable of thinking and representing itself and the world. In this sense, ecology - understood as the science of the reciprocal relation among all living beings - opens onto a semiotics exposed to the possible. The way in which we represent the surrounding world is, in some way, constitutive of our own being.

An ethnography that does not focus solely on humans or exclusively on animals, but also on the way humans and animals enter into relation, breaks that closed circularity in which we remain confined when we try to understand human specificity starting from what is specific to humans (*Ibid.*, p. 49).

First of all, then, what is required is a paradigmatic leap capable of carrying us beyond human particularity: “Encounters with other beings push us to recognize that seeing, representing, and perhaps knowing - or even thinking - are not exclusively human matters” (*Ibid.*, p. 41).

Kohn titled his book *How Forests Think*, recalling *How Institutions Think*, in which Mary Douglas referred, among others, to Durkheim’s sociology (Douglas, 1986). Here, however, the issue is not to determine how society thinks beyond and through

individuals, nor is it the structuralism of *The Savage Mind* (Lévi-Strauss, 1962). On the contrary, it is a matter of reasoning on a broader scale (extending well beyond human societies) and of seeing how at the foundation of every “I think,” there are the thoughts that the forest thinks through us.

But how does a forest think? Or rather, how can we learn to think *with* the forest so as to reflect the way it itself thinks? The thoughts generated by a forest – Kohn writes – arrive in the form of images; forests think “iconically,” through images. It is therefore necessary to think through images, through the extension of visual thinking. And this means returning to the communicative processes developed by “iconic semiosis,” as conceived and elaborated by Peirce.

Kohn, in fact, distinguishes between properly symbolic signs (specific only to the human species) and iconic signs, which belong to all species. “In addition to being symbolic creatures, we humans share these other semiotic modalities with the rest of non-human biological life” (Kohn, 2021, p. 52). We all live *with* and *through* signs – signs that also exist well beyond the human.

There is certainly a “symbolic” specificity to human thought, but it is a particularity, an emergence, a transformation of communication common to all living beings. Signs exist far beyond the human, and semiosis – the creation and interpretation of signs as traits representing the things of the world – permeates and constitutes the living world through “multispecies” (analytically intelligible) relations that by no means coincide with our language. “Symbolic reference – the feature that makes human beings unique – is an emergent dynamic embedded in this broader semiosis of life from which it originates and upon which it depends” (*Ibid.*, p. 123). Representation is “something more general than human language and is distributed more widely” (*Ibid.*, p. 96). Semiosis extends beyond the symbolic (the specifically human semiotic mode that makes language, culture, and society possible as we know them).

If Luhmann, remaining within the field of the social sciences, conceived the social system in relation to the external environment as a process of continuous communication – that is, as an autopoietic entity capable of self-regulation through communication (Luhmann, 1985) – Kohn’s “anthropology beyond the human” rethinks relationality and (interspecies) communication as an essentially semiotic process. Kohn, in other words, does not conceive the social system but rather the environment as the total horizon of semiotic interconnection. “My idea, in short,” he writes, “is that an anthropology beyond the human can rethink relationality by seeing

it as semiotic, but not always and necessarily akin to language” and to the symbolic (Kohn, 2021, p. 166).

From this standpoint, sign processes (through which thoughts emerge) become essential to understanding intersubjectivity as a semiotically mediated dimension. “We can come to know ourselves and others only through the mediation of signs” (*Ibid*, p. 171).

It is precisely through this mediation that an ecology of selves unfolds, open to the “points of view” of other organisms – that is, to those “selves” produced by the ways they represent and interpret the world around them, and by the ways in which others in the world represent them. It is therefore a matter of liberating thought from its exclusive human dwelling, to open ourselves to those living thoughts that go beyond the human, contributing to making “us” what we are.

6. Ethical perspectives

We now find ourselves facing a problem that can no longer be ignored: to understand the human, we must shift our gaze toward what is not human; to understand society, we must extend our vision to an environmental horizon that is not exclusively social; to understand the environment, we need an ecology that, through the human, goes beyond the human, opening itself to semiotic contexts pertaining to other sensible worlds – contexts of relation, interaction, and reaction between the human and the non-human world.

After pushing thought to the limits of a paradigmatic leap on the (ecological) planes of epistemology and ontology, what remains is to redirect our path toward the territories of ethics. As Kohn has rightly pointed out, “morality, like the symbolic, emerges within – not beyond – the human” (Kohn 2021, p. 69). Morality is typically human, because moral thinking and ethical action presuppose the symbolic – namely, the capacity to momentarily distance ourselves from the world and from our actions within it, to reflect upon the possible modalities of future conduct – conduct we may consider potentially good also for others beyond ourselves.

Since other “selves” in the non-human living world can grow (that is, they possess the capacity to learn through experience), it is appropriate to consider the moral implications that our actions have on their potential to grow well (a moral category) and to flourish. Put differently, “there are things that, for a living self and for its



potential to grow, can be good or bad” (*Ibid.*, p. 239). Precisely for this reason, many of the “non-human selves” (which are not symbolic creatures and therefore have no moral judgment) can prompt us to find new ways of “listening”; they can “help us imagine and realize better and more just worlds” (*Ibid.*, p. 240). “Learning to pay attention to the different lives that exist beyond the human (and beyond morality), allowing the logics of life beyond the human to work through us, is itself an ethical practice” (*Ibid.*, p. 373).

The practice of listening thus becomes an ethical perspective – a matter of responsibility, recognition, and the acknowledgment of “being in debt.” We are always in a situation of dependence (and interdependence), always somehow bound to the numerous “others” who make us what we are, and we are eternally indebted to them. This prepares the ground upon which an ethics of hospitality can be established: an ethics, in the sense restored by Lévinas, that always responds to an original summons, that assumes the primacy and precedence of the Other, and that calls us to an “infinite responsibility” toward “those” who summon us in their alterity (Lévinas, 1961). Within the terms of this primordial hospitality, one always finds oneself in the condition of the “respondent” – the one who is summoned to answer, called to respond to the Other.

It is precisely this ethics of “responsiveness” (Waldenfels, 2004) that we must bring back to the center of our attention, as the foundation of that essential interaction which unfolds the relational space among others. It is to this asymmetric equilibrium that we can refer the dynamics Kohn ascribes to the moral relationship between “us” and “non-human selves.” On this paradoxical ground plays out a relationship – based on survival – that is not without conflict. In the “natural-wild” world, indeed, what pertains to survival is founded on the dynamic of predation. In the Amazonian Forest, every “I,” whether human or non-human (a puma, for instance), if it wishes to continue to be an “I,” must be a predator: this indicates “the relational position of a self, a living I that continues as an I thanks to the objective relations with those other selves it creates through predation” (Kohn, 2021, p. 339).

In the mentality of Amazonian populations, since all “selves,” and not only human ones, are “I’s,” the predatory character also reveals the subjective standpoints of animals (which thus assume a position of subject, of “I”). Predation, in this sense, is a (trans-species) relationship charged with tension: “there is something uncontrollable, chaotic, and amoral in predation. It is a kind of power that can come back to haunt you” (*Ibid.*, p. 340). “Being a predator – and having to be one – is a frightening perspective,



not free from its own ambivalences” (*Ibid.*, p. 341). The only other choice, however, would be to become an object devoid of “self” (of subjectivity), a prey.

The recognition of subjectivity, of human or non-human “selves,” therefore implies, in the “wild” Amazonian mentality, a situation of conflict, of struggle for survival. The space of the forest is not our “civil space,” our “domestic space,” where every living being (including the human) appears as already domesticated. We inhabit the “political,” “urban” space, and today the entire world is becoming increasingly civic, enclosed within domestic walls.

From a juridical point of view, Western culture considers only the human being as a capable, responsible subject, endowed with reason and bearer of sacred and inalienable rights; it considers him, precisely, as a person (Marci, 2001): as a unique and indivisible subjectivity, from birth to death, as an indissoluble individuality.

In our universe, therefore, the person is above all a juridical construction aimed at morally valorizing the human individual (Mauss, 1938, Italian translation 1965, p. 349-381). Before even acquiring speech (the symbolic, the linguistic community), and before attaining, through language, awareness of our being, we receive through law what defines our very personality – our personal, anagraphic identity (the “proper name”): “Before we can even say ‘I,’ the law has already made each of us a subject of right” (Supiot, 2005, Italian translation 2006, p. 2).

It is society, then, that confers upon the human being his “sacred” and inalienable character; and it is society, in these terms, that elevates the individual to the rank of “person,” qualifying him as a moral subject. Such “sacrality,” according to Durkheim’s view, derives first and foremost from social order: “The human person is a sacred thing; one dares not violate it, one keeps one’s distance from the boundaries of the person – and at the same time, it is the good par excellence, the communion with others” (Durkheim, 1924, Italian translation 2015, p. 63).

In our societies, therefore, the human being – distinct from the environment, from animals, and from things, but also from his merely biological (individual and “natural”) being – receives his “sacred,” inalienable dimension thanks to society and its juridical configuration. Without such social valorization, one may be a mere individual (comparable to things or animals) but not necessarily a “person”; without this moral specification, one may be a “non-person” (Dal Lago, 2004).

Based on this juridical distinction, modern society has sought to establish a boundary between civil space and natural space, relegating the latter to a merely objectual



extension, technically orderable, controllable, and manipulable. In other words, it has sought to construct a sphere of security within an environment perceived as hostile and threatening. Yet for the human species – hegemonic on a planetary scale – the problem of security (and of defense) remains, both because the “natural” environment in which we live is never entirely separate and confined to the margins of our existence but continually interacts with us (consider, for instance, the impact of viruses, such as Covid), and because it remains, in some of its aspects, potentially hostile, and because our industrial model of production (and lifestyle) creates the very conditions for the progressive destruction of the world upon which we nonetheless depend.

It is therefore a matter of rethinking the essential relationship of human beings with the world in moral terms that belong exclusively, as we have seen, to the human as a symbolic being – capable of distancing itself from what is, to assume responsibility for what will be. The decision falls to us. And decision – already an expression of “crisis,” an index of distance and division – falls within the limits of our humanity, both ontological and epistemic. It is up to us to decide, we who are “non-coincident” beings and, therefore, responsible, capable of transcending mere worldly factuality, the biosphere of which we are part and from which we continually distance and differentiate ourselves.

It is on this plane that an ethics of hospitality reopens itself, exposed to contradiction and ambivalence, to the conflictuality that continually defines our relationship with the environment in which we live and, in some way, strive to survive. We are hosted in the world, and this relationship of hospitality forces us to rethink, in ethical terms, the relation and interaction with an environment (friendly and at the same time hostile) that goes beyond the sphere of exclusively human relations. It is precisely here that the concept of hospitality regains its original ambivalence – its link with what remains exposed to hostility – an ambivalence that the Latin language etymologically preserved in the *endiadi hostis-hospes*, in the figure of the “hostile guest,” the “friend-enemy” (Benveniste, 1969, Italian translation 1976, I, p. 64).

To accept hospitality thus means to confront conflict (whether it be the struggle with other “predators”), the ambivalent antagonism of tension between opposites typical of relations among strangers; it means accepting the ambiguous logic of the *pharmakon*, of the remedy-poison. But it also means restoring to the world we inhabit its “sacredness” – and the restitution of the sacred can only pass along the perilous paths of ambivalence, the only possible road for a theory that, by its very constitution, has long since lost the immediacy, awe, and enchantment of the sacred.



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