NARRATIVES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE ERA

Charles Travis, Vittorio Valentino (Editors)

Preface by Kirill O. Thompson

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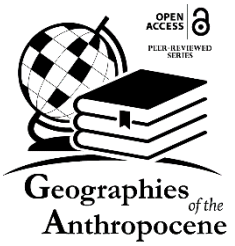
Geographies of the Anthropocene

Narratives in the Anthropocene era

Charles Travis

Vittorio Valentino

Editors



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11. All my earthothers: Levinasian tools for deep ecology

Erika Natalia Molina Garcia[1]

Abstract

The work of Emmanuel Levinas has been both abundantly recognized and criticized in moral philosophy. This Janus-faced attitude is also present in ecological theories, which find fertile ground in Levinas' thought without being able to explain its apparent anthropocentrism. Opposing hermeneutical paths tend to focus either on otherness as an absolute alterity, implying a potentially unlimited responsibility for all alterities, or on otherness as a re-foundation of humanism, leading to the conclusion that responsibility is unlimited only among humans. Here I seek to disentangle Levinas from these two extreme interpretations, first by reviewing ecological readings of his philosophy, in both the Francophone and Anglophone spheres, and second by analyzing specific Levinasian terms that might be particularly helpful for a non-anthropocentric or deep ecology. The main results of this investigation are a distinction between the ethics of responsibility and the ethics of vulnerability, an explanation of Levinasian compulsory or methodological humanism, and a schematic model of sensibility as enjoyment/vulnerability capable of supporting deep ecology without the traditional notions of free will, rights, or values.

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas, deep ecology, paganism, enjoyment, vulnerability

1. Introduction

Lawrence Buell identifies six families of themes around which environmental rhetoric revolves (Buell, 2009, p. 197):

1. risk society and toxicity;

2. ecojustice or resistance by returning to and developing a grounding metaphysics and subsequent changes in law;

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3. Gaia, a single homeostatic biosphere;

4. ecotheology, a spiritual holism of the material world;

5. ecofeminist ethics of care against patriarchal subjugation, the earth as a female being;

6. sustainability, the regulation of our current models to prevent the overexploitation and further degradation of nature as a human habitat and resource.

These themes develop, gain or lose traction, legitimacy and usefulness, depending on the discursive domain they belong to, whether political, economic, spiritual, etc. Even if the ideas they carry are philosophical, the fact that philosophical discourse as an institutionalized practice can focus on one or many of these six themes, or on ecological issues in general, already represents a contemporary achievement in our culture. This is because, at least in the Western tradition, philosophy has, indeed, been marked by the ideas that presumably led us to the ecological crisis we are in. Philosophy is the place where the ideas of a subject separated from its natural habitat and of unlimited progress formed. It is therefore not a simple task to develop an ecological reading of a philosophical work, especially when its author has not faced the ecological challenges we face today. Even if we consider a gross simplification of these six discursive lines and distinguish only between surface and deep ecology, the task is still complex.

In this text, I will examine the case of Emmanuel Levinas in the context of deep ecology.

For half a century, a distinction has been made between an ecology inherently anthropocentric and reluctant to consider nonhuman entities as more than instruments, and an ecology that seeks to value all forms of material, cultural, and biological diversity beyond their utility (Drengson, 2008, p. 27). Deep ecology can thus be understood as an attempt to establish a new sense of non-dominant coexistence with nonhuman alterities, even though these efforts may seem unrealistic and often fall back into traditional ideologies.

In order to read Levinas not only from an ecological point of view but from a deep-ecology perspective, we need to examine his thoughts on humanism, animal value and against a particular idea of nature. To do this, it is necessary to understand certain historical elements that surround his philosophy. This philosopher, widely recognized as one of the most important ethical thinkers and the most original in the twentieth-century continental tradition (Atterton & Calarco, 2004, p. xx), has, however, also been extensively criticized for his inability to provide satisfactory solutions to moral questions. From secularism to feminism, from ecology to antispeciesism, his work has been declared at

best an important but outdated reference, and at worst a pernicious artefact of patriarchal anthropocentrism.

To bring more clarity into these debates, I conduct a bibliographical survey of ecological readings of Levinasian philosophy and examine those that I consider to be his most useful concepts from the perspective of deep ecology.

2. Ecological readings of Levinas' work

In this section, I address the trajectories Levinasian ideas have had in the context of ecological thought by examining Francophone and Anglophone academic literature separately.

To follow a particular concept across different times and geographies and to understand the hermeneutical reasons for its persistence or disappearance, it is important to distinguish between explicit and implicit influence and to try not to dismiss implicit references as inexistent. This is particularly important in the case of Levinasian concepts. Levinasian theories and vocabulary that play a criticizing but crucial role in Western philosophy as a whole, as well as in specific disciplines relevant to ecology, such as somatic phenomenology or ethics, are often present in ecological thought, but usually treated as familiar, unproblematic concepts and therefore not explicitly referred to the author, even when the assumed meaning of these concepts in a given text is clearly not general but technical and specifically Levinasian.

Baptiste Morizot, for example, presents an ecology against objectivism and reductionism, warns against ecological neo-animism, explains how ecology must become sensitive to the *immemorial* and *do justice* (*faire justice*) to alterity (Morizot, 2020), without referring to Levinas, but simply repeating the author's theories, and thereby *de facto* rebranding them under his name. Similar to this form of omission and appropriation, certain conceptual genealogies will minimize the influence Levinas had. For example, Catherine Larrère traces the questioning of our dominating relationship with nature to Michel Serres asking *how can we dominate our domination; how can we master our own mastery?* (Serres, 1995, p. 172) and to Hans Jonas' ethics of life.

We should assume that the authors are not obliged to retrace the countless philosophical responses to social change. We also acknowledge that Serres and Jonas are very important ecological sources and that, for Larrère, Serres is one of the first to diagnose the Anthropocene as such, as the end of the separation between natural and human history (Larrère, 2018, p. 137). The minimalization of Levinas' authorship is nevertheless remarkable:

> While humans share a defining vulnerability with all living things, they also have a specific responsibility for the present vulnerability of the Earth […] Here, the obligation comes from another, but it is his weakness that imposes it on us. It is therefore from the heart of dependence that responsibility arises. We can undoubtedly see a reference to Levinas in this way of talking about others and the obligation they impose on us. But the link thus established between power, vulnerability and responsibility is typical to Jonas (Larrère, 2014, p. 3).

These attempts to erase Levinas or minimize his relevance to ecological reflection go so far as to actively set up alternative genealogies for such distinctive terms as alterity -as used by Levinas-, ethical asymmetry, epiphany of the face, ethics of vulnerability, or the link between power, vulnerability and responsibility.

They might nevertheless have certain grounds. The omission or trivialization could be a means of overcoming aspects of Levinasian thought that are considered incompatible with ecology. If Levinas is indeed considered an anthropocentric author, and ecology should extend responsibility to nonhuman life, it is understandable that some would seek to minimize the philosopher's importance. Even if the author's anthropocentrism is not assumed, the path of omission/minimization might simply be chosen to avoid the inconvenience of discussing his anthropocentrism.

Tacit or overt references to Levinas's theories could also be coincidences favored by a particular *zeitgeist*, *viz.* by the possibility that a generation defined by the sharing of collective experiences might produce thinkers with common insights, diagnoses, struggles and ideals. These would translate into unconsciously similar positions.

2.1. Francophone readings

In the Francophone sphere, Serres, Latour and Descola, prominent proponents of environmentalism in the last third of the twentieth century, espoused Levinasian ideas, particularly in relation to the critique of Cartesian dualism, *viz.* a critique of Reason, disembodiment, the separation of the subject from various material alterities, including nature, and the violence-producing superiority of the ego. They also share the subsequent praise of the Other, difference and discontinuity.

In the second half of the twentieth century, this critical gesture was ubiquitous, even if it had to be insisted upon and applied to different domains to become what is now the mainstream of ecological discourse: the responsibility of each one of us for the health and future of our planet as a whole. In this philosophical development, the ideas of Levinas and his particular version of the critique of Cartesian dualism were crucial. This version was a Husserlian version.

Although phenomenology is usually understood as egology or intentional analysis of the ego -which is only a small portion of phenomenological studies-, Husserl's critique of Cartesian dualism already contained a structured set of ecological claims: a critique of naturalism and naturalistic sciences, the extension of the moral subject from the ego to the intersubjective community -which did not necessarily exclude nonhuman life-, and the revendication of the *lebenswelt* (life-world) as the source of meaning:

> […] psychology began with a concept of soul which was not at all formulated in an original way but which stemmed from Cartesian dualism […]. Thus, psychology was burdened in advance with the task of being a science parallel to physics and with the conception that the soul -its subject matter- was something real in a sense similar to corporeal nature, the subject matter of natural science. As long as the absurdity of this century-old prejudice is not revealed, there can be no psychology which is the science of the truly psychic, i. e., of what has its meaning originally from the life-world (Husserl, 1970, p. 212).

Inheriting this phenomenological analysis through Levinas, current versions of the critique of dualism develop and radicalize it further. In this sense, Serres, Latour and Descola multiply the fields of translation/application of this critique, taking it to their research areas: philosophy of science, sociology, and ethnology. These authors represent in the theoretical field an increasing sense of urgency in the will for change concerning our knowledge paradigms, expressed by Husserl, and in the call for consequential change in our behavior, made by Levinas.

This ever-increasing urgency is related to countless historical events and social changes, of which Husserl and Levinas witnessed only the beginnings, only a fraction: health scandals, natural disasters, linked, among other things, to the exponentially accelerated rate of industrialization and thus the concrete pollution/destruction of our environment. Countless philosophical and sociological factors, but also the tangible and snowballing multiplication of these events and their dissemination through mass media, lead to the still

rather deficient cumulative awareness we can have of our interdependence, of the effects of our common habits and models of development, and of the still unclear question of how these are interrelated and perhaps even have their origin in the metaphysical and epistemological models to which we -rather mechanically- adhere.

Almost three decades ago, Michel Serres formulated this question as follows:

> […] the relation of metaphysics to knowledge, and the relation of the latter to domination come together in the same place, at the outcome provided by death. For Plato and a tradition which lasted throughout the classical age, knowledge is a hunt. To know is to put to death […] These epistemologies are not innocent: at the critical tribunal they are calling for executions. […] Today we live out the major results of these wolfish actions. […] The reason of the strongest is reason by itself. Western man is a wolf of science. Nothing is new under the sun of identity and nothing is kept under the same old sun. Nothing new and nothing born, there is no nature. […] The angle of inclination cures the plague, breaks the chain of violence, interrupts the reign of the same […] The minimal angle of turbulence produces the first spirals here and there. It is literally revolution (Serres, 1995, p. 100).

Serres expresses here that Western metaphysics and classical epistemologies are, if not the main cause, at least one of the causes of our predatory behavior toward nature and of our societies structured by domination. This is one of the main tools of Levinasian philosophy that can nourish ecological thought. The account of Lucretian atomism as an antidote and metaphysical alternative to rationalism and sameness, crafted by Serres along these lines, is also found in Levinas (Levinas, 1974, p. 107).

Apart from the apparent adoption of ecological phenomenology by these authors, which is not acknowledged, there are philosophers who explicitly build their ecological reflection with -for or against- Levinas, including Derrida, Pelluchon, and the feminist thinkers Irigaray and Chalier.

Derrida, even in his earliest works, attempted to adopt Levinasian discourse embracing ecologically relevant ideas. He adhered explicitly to the Levinasian critique of metaphysics, his search for another language that cannot be recovered by the philosophy of presence, and the relation of the self to alterity as the fundamental horizon. If we were to select the most important of the ideas adopted, it would be the fact of actively maintaining the indeterminability of the form of justice or of the concrete political formula

that best corresponds to the ethics of alterity. This is a Levinasian silence that Derrida shares and greatly appreciates (Derrida, 1997, p. 201).

In order to make these ideas and philosophical gestures his own and give them a new scope, Derrida worked with the Levinasian terms in which they were distilled. For example, with *the trace* (Derrida, 1967, p. 103), the idea of a past that was never present, irretrievable but there, the elusive condition of sensibility.

Late in his work, Derrida will redefine his deconstructive project as a critique of *carnophallogocentrism* (Derrida, 2006, p. 144). With this term, he extends the Levinasian critique of Western metaphysics as logocentric, identity-oriented, and phallocentric, to the realm of animal subjugation, exploitation, and consumption. Western metaphysics needs to be deconstructed, not only in those aspects that are hurtful to us humans, but also in those that hurt others. With this recalibration of deconstruction as a defense of all forms of life, Derrida separates himself from Levinas and joins the interpretation that assumes Levinas valued only humans. Derrida thus places our philosopher in the tradition that, from Aristotle to Heidegger and beyond, rejected responsibility for nonhuman life and justified its violent domination (*Ibid.*, p. 54).

Irigaray and Chalier lay out a critique of Levinas that does not address nonhuman alterities but remains ecologically relevant.

If the crucial ecofeminist gesture is to interpret Western traditional paradigms as a common source of violent oppression of women and all *earthothers*, i.e. children, other human adults, animals, plants, earth, air, (Plumwood, 1993, p. 137), Levinas should always remain an element of reflection because of his relentless critique of ontology and his commitment to building a future in which embodiment and the ethics derived from it are the foundation.

Simone de Beauvoir, however, started a particular hermeneutic path that still prevents ecofeminist readers from finding the resources, ideas, and inspirations that Levinas has to offer. In a brief footnote, de Beauvoir expressed her amazement at Levinas defining women in terms of mystery, while adopting a condescending perspective, the perspective of a man (de Beauvoir, 1989, p. 16). Even though Levinas refers to femininity as a principle rather than a term to describe women or their attributes, the doubt remains: Why use *a term so scarcely neutral as that of the feminine?* (Chalier, 2001, p. 178). The central role of the feminine as a form of alterity that, according to Levinas, enables culture to change does not justify his vocabulary. Irigaray remains puzzled by this secondary role of the feminine and the heroic narrative of masculinity liberated by it. Why would Levinas make the feminine a helper for masculinity to change, for patriarchy to

evolve? For Irigaray, as for Derrida, it is not the language chosen that is problematic, but the ideas that Levinas seems unable to leave behind. Moreover, Irigaray finds Levinas incapable of describing the erotic experience in a non-sublimating, less appropriative way (Irigaray, 2008, p. 16) and too committed to an emphasis on asymmetry, which could undermine reciprocity and democracy (*Ibid*., p. 70).

Finally, Corine Pelluchon is the only Francophone author who explicitly places Levinas at the center of a solid ecological reading. Ecology, usually unable to move beyond the anthropocentrism/ecocentrism opposition, unable to offer non-traditional affects, change our behavior, improve our relationships, transform democracy or meaningfully modify our economic model, can get closer to doing all these things if we existentially rewire it to the human condition (Pelluchon, 2019, p. 4).

In Levinas, Pelluchon recognizes this connection and the descriptions of existence that might allow us to build an ecological philosophy without imposing individual values that would go back to subjective choice and thus to the ego: "I would say that [in Levinas] there is the promise of a philosophy that makes of corporeality, of the body of others, perhaps even of the body of other living beings, the place of ethics; a place [Levinas] did not develop so much for he was so focused on the responsibility for other people that this may have eclipsed the rest" (Pelluchon, 2020, min.10).

2.2. Anglophone readings

Although Levinas has not been sufficiently recognized as an ecological author in the Francophone world, ecological interpretations of his work in an English-speaking context are numerous.

Richard Kearney asked the philosopher in 1984 whether the ethics of alterity has any meaning in our world dominated by habits, custom, politics, and regular language. Levinas answered almost accidentally by revealing his *anthropological machine* (Agamben, 2002), i.e. his human-defining strategy: language is human because humans can lie and thus respond, be responsible. Children, like animals, are pure vulnerability (Kearney, 1984, p. 65), unable to protect themselves through deception and therefore choosing sincerity over it. This short answer is important. It distinguishes two ethics that are often confused: that of responsibility and that of vulnerability. They are one when we are dealing with human-able adults. They differ when we adopt other perspectives, that are also subjective, also moral, but not responsible because they belong to merely vulnerable beings. This nuance is rarely noted, but is the heart of the haunting doubt about Levinasian anthropocentrism: if animals

do not have a *face* in the Levinasian sense, do we have obligations toward them and if so, why? (Bernasconi & Wood, 1988, p. 172).

Dave Boothroyd has recently divided the ecological readings of Levinas into four groups, focusing on 1. *the face* for nonhumans, 2. anthropocentrism, 3. philosophy of existence and immanence, and 4. metaphysics of substance excluding philosophy of transcendence (Boothroyd, 2019, p. 770-771). The bibliographical density condenses in the first group, especially around the animal issue. Beginning with the interview with Richard Kearney, this group was greatly enlivened by John Llewelyn, who as early as 1985 was concerned with the Heideggerian anthropological machine (Llewelyn, 1985, p. 16) and the ethical power of the *face of the Other* (*Ibid.*, p. 192), publishing an ecological essay that brought together Heideggerian and Levinasian postures. Beyond this questionable gesture that Llewelyn maintains (Llewelyn, 2003, p. 67), the result is the tacit assertion that Levinas can and should be used to further ecocritical research because his philosophy and his notions invite us to think ethics in a richer, untraditional way. As Llewelyn puts it: *as with a tree or a stone there is neither mouth to speak or eat nor eyes in which mortality can be read, it is not easy to suppose a face. But it may not remain impossible. As is perhaps shown by Levinas himself*. (Llewelyn, 1991, p. 199).

Also concerning nonanimal nonhumans, Michael Welsh tries to apply the Levinasian philosophy of Eros to the erotic encounter of a person with wild nature (Welsh, 1998, p. 56).

In the last two decades, multiple publications have touched on Levinasian ecology (Brown & Toadvine, 2003; Atterton, Calarco & Friedman, 2004; Atterton & Calarco, 2004, 2010; Edelglass *et al.*, 2012; Morgan *et al.*, 2019). Beyond the positions Levinas seemingly held or would express on anthropocentrism or inclusive ecology, this proliferation suggests there is fertile ground for meditation.

3. Levinasian concepts for non-anthropocentric ecologies

> *Ph. Nemo: How does one begin thinking?* […]
>
> *E. Levinas: It probably begins through traumatisms*
>
> (Levinas, 1985, p. 21)

Even if it could be argued that for Levinas *nature* and *materiality* ought to be overcome to access humanity as such (Ellis, 2019, p. 696) and it could thus be said that he *is anxious to lend emphasis to the separation between*

ourselves and other animals (*Ibid*., p. 698), I would like to show that his seeming anthropocentrism could simply be a rhetorical device, even possibly compulsory for the philosopher. I think this becomes clear if we examine the historical and biographical motivation of his work.

If we go back to 1934, Levinas explains what is to him the philosophical core of Hitlerism: the identification between the self and its body (Levinas, 1994, p. 30). At the time, the young author indicates that this unity of self and body does not abolish dualism, is not really a novelty but a continuation of Western ontology that only makes it exponentially more destructive: subject and body identified, and the body interpreted as fully biologically determined, identity becomes static, linking us naturally, materially to our homeland, to the earth as unmovable native soil, to our place under the sun, and to a racial community.

It is not only modern positivistic naturalism -the one phenomenology, since Husserl, tries to counteract- but most importantly this racist essentialism that Levinas seeks to circumvent, developing through the years his philosophy of alterity, his ethics as first philosophy and his reinterpretation of the body, sensibility and of the self as defined by his responsibility for others. It is to prevent dualism radicalized in biological essentialism from taking over again that he keeps warning us against hypnotic ideas like nature, essence, identity, *Dasein*, *sorge* and *conatus*. Is this historical reality that makes even ancient versions of dualism preferable to the Hitlerian one, for spirit is, for example, a notion that propagates, according to the author, without violence, without attachment to an autochthonous origin (*Ibid.*, p. 32). In time, the author will attempt to elaborate his own materialism and concept of transcendence beyond and against essentialism.

In this sense, I argue that Levinas insistingly defines ethics around interhuman relations not to avoid actual *earthothers*, trees or rivers, dogs or mountains or to deny them moral existence nor empathy or compassion but to prevent Hitlerian racism from awakening and spreading. All Levinasian concepts indicated here are to be understood from this perspective, this forced and possibly only rhetorical humanism.

3.1. Against-One: the metaphysical gesture

The first Levinasian step is the critique of Western tradition as developed from Parmenides (i.e. totalizing, ontological, logocentric) and Plato (i.e. transcendentalist, intellectualist, dualistic) through modern rationalism until Heidegger's care for Being and for the Dasein's death. Coinciding with

ethnographical and feminist accounts, Levinas singles this tradition of ontology before ethics as the common source of practically all evils.

> The brutality of its assertion [that of the fact of being] is absolutely sufficient and refers to nothing else. […] Western philosophy, in effect, has never gone beyond this. The insufficiency of the human condition has never been understood otherwise than as a limitation of being (Levinas, 2003, p. 51) The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy (Levinas, 1961, p. 21). The relation with Being that is enacted as ontology consists in neutralizing the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it. […] Such is the definition of freedom: to maintain oneself against the other […] *I think* comes down to *I can* -to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality. Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power (*Ibid.*, p. 46).

As seen in these lines, for Levinas, our predatory behavior and our difficulty to see others as anything else than an enemy or a possession is linked to Western philosophy being an ontology.

This first Levinasian gesture, his critique of ontology, is vital for an ecology aspiring to escape to any form of totalitarianism due to the expansion of the self, an ecology that would then *care* for all *earthothers* only because the self has absorbed them. Could this idea prevent deep ecology from becoming a simple *autology*, i.e. from reducing all differences among alterities, from caring only for the realization of humans when -falsely- claiming to be anti-anthropocentric (Plumwood, 1993, p. 175)?

The constructive side of this critique that denounces the totalizing ontology of identity, is the proclamation of the ethics of alterity that Levinas developpes under the title of *Otherwise than being*, signifying with one term the new discontinuous metaphysical paradigm, the new themes, events, experiences and concepts he will treat, the new style of thinking and the emerging new language this *other* reflection should provoke.

To summarize, the most important elements of this first twofold (critical and constructive) gesture are, first, the diagnosis, namely, to find the common source of our troubles in Western tradition, and the solution, specifically, to put ethics as *prima philosophia*, before ontology. An important element of this solution is to caution us against all forms of subjectivity that would reproduce ontological sedimentations, for example, the sovereign, individualistic, free-willed *ego*, and to think instead of an embodied subjectivity. This last point is particularly relevant for ecology, often reduced

to a question of rights and extension of rights (Plumwood, 1993, p. 173). As Pelluchon puts it: *in speaking of the sensible world as that of nourishment, and in insisting on the vulnerability of the man who is hungry, Levinas is resolutely opposed to the philosophies that think of human beings first of all as freedom and define it as the capacity to make choices* (Pelluchon, 2019, p. 13).

3.2. Enjoyment, vulnerability and filiation

In the beginning was hunger
(Levinas, 2019, p. 193)

The second important Levinasian concept refers to the retheorization of the self just mentioned, no longer as a free-willed ego but as sensibility: the concept of the sensible dynamic of *interalterity* -to avoid the term inter*humanity*. This isn't some fortuitous part of this philosophy but its core, the result of years of work, the basis of Levinasian ethics. As shown by Pelluchon, this interpretation of sensibility is a fertile ground for ecology. This form of eco-phenomenology, Levinasian eco-phenomenology, should be distinguished from those built upon Husserl or Merleau-Ponty, upon the ideas of *life-world* or of *the flesh of the world*.

In 1974, Levinas developed all the avatars of sensibility he had been working on at least since 1947: position, enjoyment, consumption, caress, contact, vulnerability, maternity, filiation. None of these emerge in ontological or phenomenological frameworks for these remain unable to address the more-than-passive non-phenomenon of *the encounter*, of the ethical relation of sensible alterities.

If naturalism deals with objects, ontology with entities and Being, and phenomenology with the intentional architecture and its passive substratum that allows all of these layers to emerge, appear and have meaning, Levinas works at the pre-phenomenological level of *proximity*. With this term, he designates the twofold sensible dynamic that intersubjectivity or interalterity is. This duality is not that of two subjects, nor internal to each one of them, for sensibility makes of each alterity both one and transcorporeal; it is a twofold dynamic present in each and every one, a process that relates us all to all other alterities. Here *enjoyment* and *vulnerability* are the main titles for each aspect.

Proximity or sensibility has necessarily this double structure, also called *the-one-for-the-other* (Levinas, 1974, p. 26): it closes and opens, delineates subjectivity in enjoyment and consumption but also breaches its boundaries as obsession for the other, through a shared vulnerability, up until making subjectivity lose its closure, until what Levinas calls *ethical substitution*. These two movements happen together for as long as we live and feel. They both equally define each sensible-therefore-ethical alterity as unique.

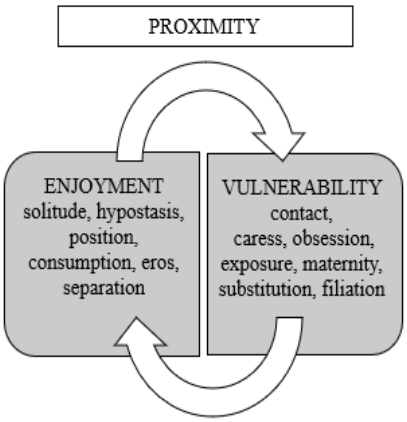

Figure 1 - *The two-fold dynamic of sensibility.*

Here we can understand the Levinasian concept of filiation or fecundity, *viz.* the idea that we are responsible not only for everyone present, but past and future, and for the universe itself: *The self is a sub-jectum; it is under the weight of the universe, responsible for everything. The unity of the universe is not what my gaze embraces in its unity of apperception, but what is incumbent on me from all sides* (*Ibid*., p. 116).

3.3. Utopia, diachrony and the third party

Technology is less dangerous than the spirits of the Place
(Levinas, 1997, p. 323)

In the context of Levinas' global philosophical gesture or *otherwise than being* (2.1) and the notion of sensibility as proximity it gives rise to (2.2), other notions also relevant for ecology emerge like his concepts of space, time and the political. Their description has always two aspects: critical and affirmative. Concerning space, Levinas opposes all the perspectives tradition has adopted: ontology, positivism and phenomenology. He opposes any static notion of place (hence of nature, *milieu*, home or world) and any rooting or attachment to it:

> Paganism is the local spirit: nationalism in terms of its cruelty and pitilessness […] The tree grows and retains all the earth's sap. A humanity with roots that possesses God inwardly, with the sap rising from the earth, is a forest or prehuman humanity. One must not be fooled by the peace of the woods. If Europe had been

> spiritually uprooted by Christianity, as Simone Weil complains, the evil would not be great (Levinas, 1997, p. 137).

This critique to the most immediate notion of space tradition has to offer should already warn us against any ecotheology or spiritual holism. Following Husserl (Husserl, 1970, p. 56), Levinas opposes positivistic reductions of space: pure Euclidean space formally defining entities as coordinates, that may be multiple and related but never as more than juxtaposed or overlaid. He looks for a notion of space not only capable of assuming multiplicity but of doing so beyond the Cartesian plane. More importantly, he also opposes phenomenological, *experienced* or *lived* space (hence the *life-world*) for it doesn't suffice for space to be qualified and sensed, it also needs to not be the product of Consciousness. Concerning time, Levinas also opposes any synchronous notion produced by Consciousness. This is why not only nature as an *esse*ntial *place*, nor only the purity of a plane, but also the world experienced by a subject is rejected.

> The subject called incarnate does not result from a materialization, an entry into space and into relations of contact and money which would have been realized by a consciousness […] It is because subjectivity is sensibility and because matter is the very locus of the for-the-other, the way that signification signifies before showing itself as a said in the system of synchronism, the linguistic system, that a subject is of flesh and blood, a man that is hungry and eats, entrails in a skin, and thus capable of giving the bread out of his mouth, or giving his skin. (Levinas, 1974, p. 77) To transcend oneself, to leave one's home to the point of leaving oneself, is to substitute oneself for another. […] The openness of space as an openness of self without a world, without a place, utopia, the not being walled in (Levinas, 1974, p. 182).

As shown in these lines, the twofold sensibility determines the Levinasian concept of space, on one side, as position and habitation, due to the dynamic of enjoyment. On the other, it defines it as utopia, a non-place where we don't communicate as classical subjects would do but rather are together in an asymmetric (for each time it's *me* more than any *other*) responsibility for each other, due to the dynamic of vulnerability.

Sensibility in these terms allows Pelluchon to build her ecological work as a *phenomenology of nourishment* (of the subject that is sensible in this sense, hungry and vulnerable) and to develop it as a *phenomenology of habitation*

(Pelluchon, 2019, p. 85), even if in her case this also includes the questionable usage of Heideggerian ideas:

> The habitation not only is connected to the residence, to the home, but rather also implies a manner of arranging a place, which organizes the space, that is to say my being-with-others-and-with-things […] the habitation presupposes that we think about that which is between beings and things […] the outside and the inside, between the fence (or the enclosure) and the opening, between nature and culture, the country and the city, rest (or withdrawal) and work (*Ibid*., p. 83-84).

The idea of a sensible being that by enjoyment/vulnerability becomes responsible for all *earthothers* that have lived and will live (which do not make them part of a totality nor make them ever comparable but maintains an absolute asymmetry and individuality among them), seems particularly useful for ecology.

According to Levinas, this might be difficult to grasp but does not have to be difficult to translate into real-world behaviors. If with the previous vision of *human-earthothers* (Gaard, 2017, p. xvii) we had to build our Hobbesian societies upon the fear of each other and constantly try to limit our violence, in this new perspective we should build them trying to limit our -sometimes violent- obsession for others, our extreme concern and our absolute responsibility for them. This limitation is what Levinas conceptualizes as the *third party*: the other of the other, the one by whom the other by which I am obsessed is obsessed. Because of this *third party* the self tames its excessive concern for the other.

4. Conclusion

Sure, he was my son. But I think to
him they were all my sons. And I guess
they were, I guess they were.
(Miller, 1957, p. 126)

I read Arthur Miller's drama *All My Sons* early in life and I saw it performed only recently. Its impact remains the same but with time and the readings of Levinas and other authors, a subtle, disconcerting feeling has appeared in relation to it. I am sure I do not fully grasp its complexity, yet there are elements of clarity, moments of the play that come back and resonate

with philosophical readings and make me question anthropocentrism, or rather help me understand why I question it, moments that take me back to a time when I felt intuitively the truth of our radical responsibility and how easy, how well equipped we are to unsee it.

The common but strange normalcy that imposes itself over great tragedies; the mother refusing to assume not the death of her flesh and blood but the guilt of a father that caused inadvertently, carelessly, mechanically (and almost joyfully in his not-knowing), the death of his son and many others; this mother situated as a *third party*, being responsible for normalcy because of her pain, but also responsible for the burst of truth and justice (Ann: *you are making me do this!*); the young man, the brother, who forces everyone to be better, to do better than humanly possible; the unfathomable responsibility itself, made palpable by a simple, almost silly choice that results in the death or trauma of a whole generation; and finally, the enormous guilt, evident to everyone but to the one who should feel it, the father, blind and violent because of his attachment to a biological image of family (*I'm his father and he's my son, and if there's something bigger than that I'll put a bullet in my head!* Miller, 1957, p. 120). These scenes, these roles, replay in my mind, I recognize them at different points, in different landscapes, internal and external, like archetypes of the ever-repeating tragedy of the banality of evil and willful blindness.

Levinas allows us to understand this blindness and to think, not about the reach of our responsibility and actions, but -assuming they are universal- about sensibility. To think about sensibility, about proximity, about the vulnerability of those who we can hurt and our own, is to pause and question what determines if we stop when seeing them, when seeing we have hurt them, when seeing we ought to help them, if we feel concerned or not by others, by all earthothers, their needs, their deaths.

Talking about Cain, the philosopher explains:

> It is in the Face of the Other that the commandment comes which interrupts the progress of the world […] Why would I feel responsible in the presence of the Face? That is Cain's answer when someone says to him: Where is your brother? He answers: Am I my brother's keeper? […] Cain's answer is sincere. Ethics is the only thing lacking in his answer; there is only ontology: I am I, and he is he. We are separate ontological beings (Levinas, 1998, p. 110).

As indicated before, to understand Levinas' positions on humanism, animal value and his stance against a particular idea of nature, it is necessary

to grasp the context and content of his philosophy. The context of the rise of nationalism, his captivity and the Holocaust, and the content of the twofold, transcorporeal, all-encompassing sensibility and the absolute responsibility it implies.

His undecided answers on animality or his problematic notion of *the face* should not be used to make of him a moment of anthropocentrism. His philosophy is not about affirming human-*earthothers* over the rest but about preventing the barbaric imposition and violent domination of some humans over everyone and everything else.

It is not a question of inclusion or exclusion in the sphere of what is valuable because is not a question of individuals nor a question of a free subject that has rights and confers value.

This is why the author can say that ethics owes nothing to values and values owe everything to ethics (Levinas, 1992, p. 225) and why Miguel Abensour considers that simply saying that Levinas is an ethical thinker is meaningless (Abensour, 2012, p. 41).

After all the concepts here reviewed, if only one was to be kept, it should be the Levinasian notion of sensibility. We should never forget that at every moment we are embodied subjects, *viz.* we all are both enjoyment and vulnerability, desire and exhaustion. Sensibility is both our gift and our curse. Our embodied experience is both the source of our ethical existence because we share it, we recognize it on each other, we care for how vulnerable others are, and at the same time is the constant threat of our protective self-withdrawal for we all have needs and therefore fears.

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