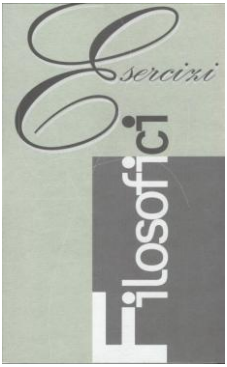

From the Problem of "Secondary Qualities" to Intrinsically Relational Identity. Environmental Implications

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FROM THE PROBLEM OF "SECONDARY QUALITIES" TO INTRINSICALLY RELATIONAL IDENTITY. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS.

Elisa Cavazza

> The identification of primary properties with those of objects themselves leads to a conception of *nature without any of the qualities we experience spontaneously*. Now, there is no good reason why we should not look upon such a bleak nature as just a resource. Every appeal to save parts of nature based on reference to sense-qualities of any kind becomes meaningless. Every passionate appeal that reveals deep feelings, empathy, and even identification with natural phenomena must then be ruled out as irrelevant. The sphere of real facts is narrowed down to that of mechanically interpreted mathematical physics.[1]

1. *Assumptions and purpose*

My proposal connects three arguments from Arne Naess, Alfred North Whitehead and Hans Jonas, sharing an initial critical reference to the problem of "secondary qualities", from which I draw relevant consequences for ecophilosophical thinking.

"Secondary qualities" and their ontological difference from the so-called "primary qualities" are regarded as a token of the necessity of reframing the emergence of our worldview and the status of subjectivity. The critique starts from the refusal of materialism and dualism as they leave out something important in our experience of the world and in the constitution of identity. Through relational, processual and organicistic arguments these three authors put forth alternative perspectives to the subject-object dichotomy and the consequent mentality of domination that belongs to a subject who externally observes reality.

The arguments also include a cardinal critique of constitutional abstractions in the fundamental elements of cosmologies. Later, they shed light on the task of a more concrete account of experienced reality. I suggest these arguments, in

[1] Naess, A., *The World of Concrete Contents*, «Inquiry», 28, 1985, p. 420. Emphasis in the text.

particular Naess's and Whitehead's, are epistemologically embedded in a form of perspectivist and representationalist critique which, in connection to relationalism, bears important consequences for a minimal "transcendental" anthropocentrism and an egalitarian account of intrinsic value. This also means that a pragmatical aspect is included in the very epistemological relevance of any environmental ontology discourse and that practical aspects of our worldview are originally embedded into it, in various forms.

By "materialism" I am referring to the meaning accorded to it within the proposed arguments. The three authors argue we still dwell in the fundamental idea of the Aristotelian substance, which takes its present form within the modern scientific paradigm. «Reality», then, is made of separate independent «things», merely connected by direct physical external relations, which do not change the intrinsic constitution of entities. The counterpart of materialism is some form of subjective projection of inexplicable aspects of experience onto passive inert matter.

The purpose of this outline is to put forth a relational perspective on identity of selves. Relational identity, inevitably, includes a practical dimension in two respects. Firstly, it does so in the epistemic determination of the emergence of subject and objects, always conditioned by dimensions of experience, of which cognitive mentality is only one aspect, far from being its paramount. Secondly, the conjunction of relationalism and perspectivism produces a practical attitude of "letting be", respect of «otherness», openness to dialogue and further normative agreement in conflict resolution, and the very possibility of thinking a principle of "egalitarianism".

2. *A due inquiry into our sense of reality*

Several radical thinkers in environmental ethics and ecophilosophy argue that questioning the moral relationship between humans and nature implies deeper questioning about our worldview. Solely within the context of an indifferent gaze towards a meaningless natural world, may exploitation of the environment and dominion over non-human forms of life persist so violently and recklessly. The ecological crisis challenges anthropocentrism and the concept of independence of the individual as a basis for moral decision making, calling instead for an inquiry into deeper assumptions about our perception of natural objects, into hidden beliefs about the status of what is other-than-human and into our sense of reality as conditions of self-image and practice. This is the original task of deep ecology, concerned both with a *deeper questioning* in

terms of ontological prejudice and vested interests,[2] and the necessity of *deeper changes* in economic and social structures, as well as a relational paradigm shift in the ideological orientation of our civilisation.[3] Others have concentrated on the modern definition of an actual epistemology of dominion, where speculative roots precede the technological genesis of the ecological crisis and human knowledge defines its own nature and methods in accord with the possibility to predict, control and exploit a less and less normative nature.[4]

The ontological dualism between man and nature resulting within a certain western anthropocentric humanistic cosmology has been questioned diffusely as a foundational inquiry both for the capital problem of intrinsic value of nature and for the inauguration of a change in our ethical systems by thinkers diversely associated with radical ecology.[5] Furthermore, an homologous plea has recently emerged from fields of inquiry different from the very philosophical one, for instance climate change and sustainability research. Karen O'Brien, as leader of the Norwegian project P.L.A.N.,[6] has lately argued that the most effective leverage point for change is the power to transcend paradigms, becoming conscious of how our «subjective worlds», interests and perspectives frame problems and adaptive solutions. After many years of research in the field, Prof. O'Brien came to the disconcerting verdict that:

[2] The «rejection of the man-in-the-environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image». Naess, A., *The Shallow and the Deep Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary*, «Inquiry», 16, 1973, p. 95.

[3] See Naess, A., *Deepness of Questions and the Deep Ecology Movement*, in Naess, A., Glasser, H., Drengson, A. (eds.), *The Selected Works of Arne Naess*, Springer, Dordrecht 2005, vol. X, pp. 21-31.

[4] See Tallacchini, M., *Etiche della terra*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1998.

[5] Some of the most influential philosophers addressing this problem, among others: the conservationist Aldo Leopold; the Norwegian founder of the philosophical tenets of deep ecology, Arne Naess; Eugene Hargrove, creator in 1979 of the journal «Environmental Ethics»; Paul Taylor in his inquiry on intrinsic value; Freya Mathews, Paul Shepard and J.B. Callicott diversely arguing on the problem of ontologies and scientific paradigms; M. Zimmerman in his analysis of worldviews' ecological critique in light of postmodern topics. Radical ecology is a label usually classifying the three movements of deep ecology, social ecology and ecofeminism. There can, however, be found no uniformity and harsh debates have taken place among these three main approaches, diversely oriented in purpose and argumentation. For a further analysis: Eckersley, R., *Environmentalism and Political Theory. Toward an Ecocentric Approach*, UCL Press, London 1992; Zimmerman, M.E., *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1994.

[6] «Potentials and Limits to Adaptation in Norway». Interdisciplinary social science-based research project funded by the Research Council of Norway's NORKLIMA program to investigate how individuals and communities in Norway adapt to climate change. <http://www.sv.uio.no/iss/english/research/projects/plan/>.

> Norway is a small country with a high capacity to adapt to climate change, at least according to objective indicators such as wealth, education, institutions, technology, social equity, etc. Yet our research shows that this capacity alone is not enough: there is a need to look at the challenges posed not just by climate change, but by change itself.[7]

In her argument, the challenge has to do with experiencing the danger of an irreversible climate change as real, acknowledging the dependence of the perception of our societal risk on cultural interpretations, for example taking into consideration the dysfunctionality of our western, post-illuministic dichotomous ideologies. Irrelevant to the agreed upon rate of climate change, adaptive significance should be accorded to the expansion of our worldview in order to include environmental changes as relevant in our policies and choices. However, in the meantime, climate change is largely denied any «objective» place within our paradigms and it is widely perceived as an externally separate process. This is reductionist of the complexity of the human-environment ever evolving relationship, within which even doing nothing is choosing by default.

Needless to say, the question about the status of the natural world, and how we should adjust our picture of it, is not independent from the emergence of ecological science. According to Callicott, the description offered by New Ecology puts forth an organic and holistic concept of nature and ecophilosophy is called to deal with the «metaphysical implications of ecology».[8]

Although the ecosystemic picture of the living world proves to be very different from the paradigms of physics, it does not necessarily contrast with materialism nor with anthropocentrism, and most importantly, it does not imply any ethical considerations: as Callicott himself emphasises, «the philosophical interpretation of the new ecology is quite another thing from its agronomic and managerial applications», considering that «the quantitative precision of which Tansley's energy circuit model was capable», potentially would have made ecosystems more «productive and efficient so as to yield a higher caloric crop».[9]

The factor bringing ecophilosophers face to face with ecological science lies in its historical potential to raise questions about our paradigms of nature. For

[7] O'Brien, K., *The Courage to Change: Adaptation from the Inside-Out*, forthcoming in Moser and Boykoff, eds., *Successful Adaptation: Linking science and Practice in Managing Climate Change Impacts*. Personal communication, Oslo, 14 September 2012. O'Brien also makes wide use of the complex system thinking in transition and sustainability studies from Donella Meadows, one of the authors of the 1972 M.I.T. report for the Club of Rome, *The Limits to Growth*.

[8] Callicott, J.B., *The Metaphysical Implications of Ecology*, in Keller, D.R., ed., *Environmental Ethics. The Big Questions*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden 2010, p. 404.

[9] *Ibidem.*

instance, they provide descriptions of interconnectedness and totality.[10] I defend a perspective in which ecology provides important conceptual tools and descriptive knowledge that can *inspire* ecophilosophical reflection, as they become part of our world experience and transformative knowledge. Arne Naess himself includes *diversity*, *complexity* and *symbiosis* within his ecosophical system and transforms their maximisation into established ethical norms. What makes Naess's position remarkable in this respect, however, is his warning to avoid any naive direct *derivation* of any ecosophical thinking from ecological descriptions. Not only is he academically concerned about the naturalistic fallacy, but he sees several dangers in «ecologism». The universalisation of scientific descriptions misses the crucial point of the inquiry into our broader and spontaneous knowledge and access to the world.[11]

An important point is raised, according to Naess, when it is said that «ecology changes our values by changing our *concepts* of the world and of ourselves in relation to the world. It reveals new relations among objects which, once revealed, stir our ancient centres of moral feeling».[12] But this disturbance in our value priorities, this «stirring», is only understandable in terms of perturbation in our «experienced totalities» of the world, occurring within the question of «what kind of change in concept of the world and status of the subject is at issue».[13] Ecosystem models are abstract accounts of certain natural structures. Setbacks emerge when we forget that, in the words of Naess: «'Objective descriptions of nature' offered us by physics ought to be regarded not as descriptions of nature, but as descriptions of certain conditions of interdependence and thereby can be universal, common for all cultures».[14]

[10] According to Tansley, ecosystems «are the basic units of nature on the face of the earth». See the entry «Ecology» in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ecology/>.

[11] Naess, A., *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989, pp. 39-41. «Ecosophy» is the term Naess conceived in order to denote «a philosophical world-view or system [or "total view"] inspired by the conditions of life in the ecosphere», in which insight is «directly relevant for action». For a terminological distinction between *ecology*, *ecophilosophy*, *ecosphy* and *Ecosophy T*, see *ivi*, pp. 35-38. On the risk of ecologism, see also Naess, A., *A Defense of the Deep Ecology Movement*, «Environmental Ethics», 6, 1984, p. 269. Zimmerman remarks the point, contextually to his interpretation of Naess's position as «ontological phenomenalism»: «some ecologists say that organisms and ecosystems are constituted by interrelated energy flows. Yet calculations of such flows may be used either by environmental groups to justify preserving a forest, or by timber companies to justify logging it. Though scientific assertions may provoke *prudential* concerns about poisoning our own nest, they provide no *immediate* guideline either for metaphysics or for moral behavior». Zimmerman, M.E., *op. cit.*, Kindle edition, loc. 1354-1358. Emphasis in the text.

[12] Callicott, J.B., quoted in Naess, A., *The World of Concrete Contents*, *cit.*, pp. 424-425.

[13] *Ibidem.*

[14] Naess, A., *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, *cit.*, p. 50.

Hence the matter in question is not the replacement of one out-of-date scientific «Truth» with another more agreeable one (to say, offered by ecology as ultimate science or by any other «noumenal discourse»).

Understanding the emergence of ecological issues within a certain historical self-representation of man, and within a certain cosmology is a necessary step in the ecosophical reflection, inasmuch as the critique highlights how our worldviews affect practical attitudes through a predetermination of what is real. Nevertheless, the emergence of a transformative critique of our concept of nature leading to a mature change of attitude towards the ecosphere, seems not to bear much result if we simply try to argue against «wrong» historical western cosmologies, in favour of the «right» cosmologies offered by New Physics and New Ecology (or by any mythical primitive connection with nature, nor by any exotic wiser culture). The centrality of the point leads Naess to argue that, despite his interest in philosophy of science, the high level of specialisation of contemporary physics, which makes the discipline impossible to understand by non-professionals, can even be considered «the most positive thing that has happened for a long time [...] [as] it makes clearer to all concerned that any account we offer about the world we live in (*Lebenswelt*) must be independent of the ontology of modern physics».[15]

I wish to defend an approach in which the act of fully taking on, both personally and philosophically, the task of a critical questioning on our prejudices and presumed generalisations about the world we live in, our experience of it in relation to our identity – without ceding the task advocating any comforting ready-made objectivity – does not just represent a general prerequisite, but is already the first systemic and practical step of any transformative environmental thinking, without which effective change can hardly be implemented nor convincingly moralised. A picture of an atomistic, materialistic, post-dualistic ontological separation between man and environment is no longer suitable nor functional, considering the gravity of our present situation. Philosophical interpretations of ecology express the same doubt. Our experience tells us that this picture simply leaves out something important based on its irrelevance or irrationality. The approach I propose could profit from taking the upstanding vocation of philosophy avowed by Alfred N. Whitehead seriously:

> The disadvantage of exclusive attention to a group of abstractions, however well-founded, is that by the nature of the case, you have abstracted from the remainder of things. In so far as the excluded things are important in your experience, your modes of thought are not fitted to deal with them. You cannot think without abstractions; accordingly it is of the utmost importance

[15] Naess, A., *The World of Concrete Contents*, *cit.*, p. 428. Emphasis in the text.

> to be vigilant in critically revising your *modes* of abstraction. It is here that philosophy finds its niche as essential to the healthy progress of society. It is the critic of abstractions. A civilisation which cannot burst through its current abstractions is doomed to sterility after a very limited period of progress. An active school of philosophy is quite as important for the locomotion of ideas, as is an active school of railway engineers for the locomotion of fuel.[16]

The foundational leverage of this approach is unequivocal in Naess's idea of ecosophy. Indeed, he argues that at the root of confrontations about environmental policies lies a different sense of reality in regard to those natural objects in discussion. For this reason, we must acknowledge a primacy of environmental ontology over ethics, and a critique into ontological premises needs to be undertaken as a first step. In his renowned example of environmental conflict between the anthropic development and the conservation of «the heart of the forest», Naess asserts that, in the eyes of the developer, «[...] ethics in environmental questions is based largely on how he sees reality. There is no way of making him eager to save a forest as long as he retains his conception of it as a set of trees. His charge that the conservationist is motivated by subjective feelings is firmly based on his view of reality».[17] Diehm paraphrases Naess, saying that «gestalt experience» of nature is structured differently in accordance to one's ontology.[18] Bringing to light hidden, implicit differences in ontology is necessary, first of all, since we should «get rid of the belief that mankind is something *placed in* an environment».[19] In Naess, an inquiry into our experience of what is real can refute this human-nature separation. I argue that it can also highlight how human chauvinism dominates and a devastating relation to the natural world emerges and endures within ideological drifts of objectivity.

The issue of secondary qualities has been taken into consideration by Naess and several thinkers concerned with the problem of the emergence of objects and the modes of access of our subjectivity to the world. Patently, the argument bears a reference to the pivotal problem of appearance and reality as it occurs repeatedly throughout the history of philosophy. In my reading, the argument has several implications for environmentalism. It offers a review of our experience of natural objects in the attempt of putting forward a more concrete

[16] Whitehead, A.N., *Science and the Modern World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1953, p. 73. Emphasis in the text.

[17] Naess, A., *The World of Concrete Contents*, *cit.*, p. 424.

[18] Diehm, C., *Arne Naess and the Task of Gestalt Ontology*, «Environmental Ethics», 28, 1, 2006, p. 28.

[19] Naess, A., *The World of Concrete Contents*, *cit.*, p. 424. Emphasis in the text.

and relational account of the self-world relationship, rejecting the subject-object dualism and the theory of subjective projection of qualities. It can also help to cast light on the emergence of dominion of man over nature within the reproduction of an ideological violence occurring every time we forget that our theories still select main abstract features from the richness of the world we live in, although they can be perfectly functional. Both the implications can contribute to the discussion on the key ecophilosophical issues of anthropocentrism and intrinsic value, as well as offer a basis for practice and environmental ethics. I will begin with an account of how the argument appears in Naess's «gestalt ontology». Later I will mainly refer to Whitehead's suggestion of abandoning the modern categories of Being, namely «substance and quality», and to Hans Jonas's organicism as a way of thinking the relational identity of self.[20]

3. *Secondary qualities in our experience of nature: gestalt ontology*

> Is not the value-laden, spontaneous and emotional realm of experience as genuine a source of knowledge of reality as mathematical physics? If we answer "yes!", what are the consequences for our description of nature?[21]

According to Naess, a materialistic and mechanistic approach to nature is still predominant, at least in our western cultures, in influencing decision making processes and general policies. Sustainability and environmentalist efforts are continuously under attack as their supporters are accused of lacking *objectivity*. This perspective on the natural world leads back to the modern concept of nature and is labeled by Naess as «galilean ontology», according to which primary qualities only belong to entities, where all other qualifications are to be regarded as «relative» and subjectively projected (sensual properties, emotions, values).

Traditionally, «primary qualities» are the expression of a theory developed by Locke and Descartes to indicate geometrical-mechanic qualities unanimously considered as part of physical bodies. While «secondary qualities» instead denote sensual properties, and are regarded as effects of physical processes

[20] Main references: Naess, A., *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, *cit.*; Naess, A., *The World of Concrete Contents*, *cit.*; Whitehead, A.N., *op. cit.*; Jonas, H., *The Phenomenon of Life. Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Harper & Row, New York 1966. When referred to Naess's gestalt ontology, I use the word «gestalt» in the same way Naess does: as naturalised in his vocabulary, without the German capital letter nor any indication of foreign derivation.

[21] Naess, A., *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, *cit.*, p. 32.

through which the outer world generates feelings in the perceiver.[22] Naess also adds a third category of «tertiary qualities», explained as «perceptually complex» or having a «complex gestalt character», which also includes emotions and values.[23]

Primary qualities are the basis for the definition of objects as things in themselves. They are elevated to the very structure of Being: the clever result of a reduction to the «irreducible and stubborn facts», as Galileo insists on.[24] This representation of objectivity is still so strong that everything else is ruled out as nonessential or irrational, without much effort towards even offering an account of how secondary and tertiary qualities come into being as part of the richness of human experience. Any scientific progress in our contemporary knowledge of the nature of colour, or about other sensual aspects of phenomena, certainly does not change much in the general attitude from the seventeenth century. Therefore Naess shares Whitehead's sad irony about poets, who are «entirely mistaken»:

> They should address their lyrics to themselves, and should turn them into odes of self congratulation on the excellency of the human mind. Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly. However you disguise it, this is the practical outcome of the characteristic scientific philosophy which closed the seventeenth century.[25]

[22] The historical debate is far richer and and even the different modern approaches to the argument are not completely equivalent. However I think that Naess's portrayal can be considered a good functional generalisation for the purpose of this paper. For a very detailed exposition see Nolan, L., ed., *Primary and Secondary Qualities. The Historical and Ongoing Debate*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

[23] «Tertiary qualities» appeared in Locke with a different meaning, as the power of a physical body to change its secondary qualities so that it operates «on our senses, differently from what it did before». See *ivi*, p. 306.

[24] See Whitehead, A.N., *op. cit.*, p. 10. See also Galileo quoted in Nolan, L., ed., *op. cit.*, p. 308: «I say that upon conceiving of a *material and corporeal substance* I *immediately* feel the need to conceive simultaneously that it is *bounded* and has this or that *shape*; that it is in this *place* or that at any given *time*; that it *moves* or stands still; that it does or does not touch another body; and that is one, few, or many. I *cannot separate it form these conditions* by any stretch of my imagination. But that it must be white or red, bitter or sweet, noisy or silent, of sweet or foul odor, my mind feels no compulsion to understand as necessary accompaniments. Indeed without the senses to guide us, *reason or imagination alone would perhaps never arrive at such qualities*. For that reason I think that *tastes, odor, colors*, and so forth are no more than *mere names* so far as pertains to the *subject wherein they reside*, and that they have their habitation only in the sensorium. Thus, if the living creature were removed, all these qualities would be removed and annihilated». My emphasis.

[25] Whitehead, A.N., *op. cit.*, p. 69. See the reference in Naess, A., *The World of Concrete Contents*, p. 420.

The price of galilean ontology is high. It consists of a sharp subject-object dichotomy and a necessary *duplication*. Naess considers for example the experience of a tree: one will have to admit a «real» spatial, chemical, tree-in-itself in the external world, and one mental representation of the tree inside his mind. The mental copy's rules of optical resemblance will undress it of all its experienced characters. The two trees will become so different, that they would hardly be recognised as the same tree.

In opposition to the «galilean ontology», according to which water is *neither* warm, *nor* cold, Naess puts forward what he calls the «Protagoras's *both-and*» position, an objectivist regard of properties, in which the warmth and the coldness of water are not projected by the subject onto felt surface of water, but they both can be saved as they belong to the reality phenomena. Although hardly intuitive, a non ingenuous understanding of the position is possible. It is not a matter of perceptive faith in a Being all-in-itself. The point is expanding our idea of water: the properties «should be related not to water as a separable object, but to constellations corresponding to concrete contents».[26]

Experience, indeed, occurs in holistic forms. Although, in communication, we need to separate and identify objects, these are *entia rationis*. Their emergence as relevant structures from the totality of our experience is an act of abstraction from their internal relatedness which constitutes the *concrete content* of experience itself. This is «gestalt ontology», which, in the interpretation of Zimmerman, is a form of «ontological phenomenalism».[27] There are no primary qualities, at least no ranking can be made between qualities. That is to say, there are no «things» as separable, permanent entities. The subject-object distinction itself, is one of the elements in the configuration, but it is not primary. Phenomena occur in totalities in which subjectivity is internally connected. Gestalts are not constellations of objects in external relation. They designate «objects» themselves, as totalities of higher or lower order (or width). Naess operates an inversion exposing the abstract character of those which we consider the most objective and real features of the experienced world. As a matter of fact they are less concrete, and their high level of abstraction has been the very proof of their truth and universality for a long time. As he states, «the importance of abstract structural considerations cannot be overestimated, but,

[26] Naess, A., *ivi*, p. 419. This is a reference to Protagoras as interpreted in Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism.* See *ivi*, p. 427: «Now, this man says that matter is a state of flux [...] and the senses undergo transformation and alteration in accordance with both one's age and other conditions of the body. He says also that the *grounds of all appearances lie in the matter*, so that in itself its power enables it to *be all those things which appear to all beings capable of apprehension*. And men apprehend *different things* at different times because the *conditions they are in differ*». My emphasis.

[27] Zimmerman, M.E., *op. cit.*, loc. 1348-1529.

like maps, their function is not to add to the territory, the contents, but to make it more visible».[28]

«If "cheerful tree" and "dark and threatening tree" are two spontaneous expressions - writes Naess - analysis in terms of relations may lead one to conclude that they *refer* to "the same" tree».[29] But this «sameness» is defined through abstract structures, mainly presupposing a location in space, which, let us not forget, is still a man-made theory. Although it is an important reference, it does not tell us everything important about that tree.

In my reading of Naess's attack on the primary-secondary quality separation and gestalt ontology, several consequences for environmentalism can be outlined, all of which are deeply entangled.

First of all, the perspective is meant to provide an account of those experiences of nature, such as aesthetic value, which are usually considered subjective and superfluous. These aspects, or qualities, shape our experience in a meaningful way. Tertiary qualities do not belong to a world of external geometrical objects, but they are part of the essence of *relata*. The argument also provides a basis for an objectivist exposition of the intrinsic value of nature. Value can be seen as a highly complex «quality» and nothing can be said to emerge as neutral objects within the concrete contents of our experience. The fact-value dichotomy, again, arises only if we draw a radical separation between a subject who projects value onto a meaningless object in itself. Hence the attribution of value to non-human entities, as well as all those non-economic and non-materialistic qualities, is not a matter of subjective preference, but emerges as part of our worldview. Assertions of irrelevance are always related to certain historically, personally and interest determined ideological assertions of objectivity.

Second, the critique offers a basis for a relational account of nature. Objects as insubstantial *relata* implies a concept of internal relations, so that the very definition of one «entity» cannot be separated from the constitution of what, once, were «others».[30] The idea of humanity unfolding its history on the background of an inert environment is simply an ideological, violent, and chauvinist version of humanism (in the most innocent of the cases). This idea is also gravely self-delusional, ending up endangering human interests and subjecting humans themselves as victims of the same logic and the same consequences of domination.

[28] Naess, A., *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, *cit.*, p. 67.

[29] Naess, A., *The World of Concrete Contents*, *cit.*, pp. 422-423.

[30] «The relation belongs to the definitions or basic constitutions of *A* and *B*, so that without the relation, *A* and *B* are no longer the same things». Naess, A., *The Shallow and the Deep Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary*, *cit.*, p. 95.

As a result, gestalt ontology can be considered both holistic and relational. This perspective also bears relevant consequences for anthropocentrism. The spatial position and extension qualifies the tree in the previous example by indicating the primary properties of its very being. Spatiality is theorised in relation to the human size, perspective and theorisation of space itself.[31] By recalling that all theories are man-made, Naess implies that, although man measures the world, relying on primary qualities as the only locus of real objects is a strongly anthropocentric operation. As a trivial example, just consider that, from a non-human perspective, that tree could be a shelter, or a source of food. Opening to diversity, to other sources of apprehension and centres of interest may have unexpected effects on the quality of our life. A similar argument needs to be kept in mind in regard to ethnocentrism. Adopting a standing «biospheric egalitarianism in principle»[32] involves letting the richness of the world, be it cultural diversity or non-human diversity, self-unfold and flourish.

4. *Who experiences value in nature? Perspectivism and anthropocentrism*

Naess maintains that Protagoras's *homo mensura* statement proclaims that man holds a measuring rod, but it does not offer any final verdict about what he measures, which can be discovered to be even greater than himself and his own survival.[33] What does this mean for appearance and reality, then? Does the insubstantiality of things leave «phenomena» as mere appearances? And what does this imply for the one who, despite the refusal of the «subject» category, still holds the measuring rod, at least in some broad sense? The reference to the skeptical interpretation of Protagoras certainly retains, although in the background, the suspension of judgment. This seems to incline in favour of phenomena over reality. Naess, however, wouldn't relinquish a form of realism.[34] He rejects «appearance» because it raises the question of appearance «for whom», bringing back the problem of the dichotomy between subject and object as a generalised primary distinction. Yet, the question cannot be ruled out and he calls for a form of «perspectivism», where the world, immensely complex, is brought to actualisation within different perspectives and narrations.

[31] Of which not even the history of physics maintain a unanimous account, as Whitehead shows in *Science and the Modern World*.

[32] Naess, A., *ibidem*.

[33] See Naess, A., *A Defence of the Deep Ecology Movement*, «Environmental Ethics», 6, 1984, pp. 264-270.

[34] See for example Naess, A., *Life's Philosophy. Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World*, University of Georgia Press, Athens & London 2002, pp. 38-39; Naess, A., *Heidegger, Postmodern Theory and Deep Ecology*, «The Trumpeter», 14, 4, 1997, <http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/index.php/trumpet/article/view/175/217>.

Subjectivity is entangled in experience in so many complex and transient configurations (perception, sensations, emotions, past experience, personal *total views*) that a neat cut is not possible without a certain degree of arbitrariness and a good amount of abstraction, which will leave out some important conditions. However, perspectivism also may be misleading, if it calls into question a concept of consciousness that implies cartesian mental representations, with which «gestalt-thinking dispenses».[35]

The «subjective» counterpart to gestalt ontology can be explored through the Naess's concept of *ecological self*, a processual relational self, of which consciousness is only one of the possible elements, and the cognitive dimension is only one among a manifold of conditions of experience. The expansion of the very definition of self identity among the lines of its relations corresponds to an expansion of its very interests, the fulfilment of which comes to include the self-realisation of others. The act of centring gestalt ontology in an extended relational concept of self is one of Naess's most important philosophical merits, considering that a major part of the deep ecology movement would not easily abandon realist accounts of holism, by fear of sacrificing a foundation for nature conservation in the name of the critique to representationalism (often suffering from the accusation of philosophical naivety).[36] Certainly, after criticising the ideology of primary qualities, there remains no more room for a noumenal description, even if we advocate one of a more agreeable organicistic tone. This raises the risk of relativism. Naess would answer that relationalism should not be mistaken for relativism. Selves are centres of relations, and their perspectives leave room for «possibilism»: the idea that the future is always open in principle.[37] Perspectivism and possibilism are then grounded in relationalism because if everything is interconnected, investigation is an infinite, partial, contingent task which continuously opens unexpected possibilities.

In regards to anthropocentrism, the ecological self cannot be accused of being anthropocentric, since its conclusion is of a process of dismantling human centrality in history and in nature. Nevertheless, it seems a residual dimension remains: it is what Prof. Schmithausen calls «transcendental anthropocentrism» in the exposition of his approach to ecological issues in early Buddhism.[38] This corresponds to an ineradicable anthropogenic position, the recognition of which does not compromise the understanding of an intrinsic value of natural objects, nor a mature step back, making room for other selves' realisation. Naess would

[35] Naess, A., *The World of Concrete Contents*, *cit.*, p. 426.

[36] See Zimmerman, M.E., *op. cit.*, loc. 1088.

[37] See Naess, A., *Life's Philosophy. Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World*, *cit.*, pp. 4-5.

[38] Schmithausen, L., *Buddhism and Nature. The lecture delivered on the occasion of the EXPO 1990*, Studia Philologica Buddhica, Occasional Papers Series VII, The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, Tokyo 1991.

accept this interpretation, considering that all his ecosophical work begins with taking charge of a biological and historical responsibility of human kind in the face of ecological crisis.[39]

Even after these considerations, the task of offering a clearly developed account of Naess's perspectivism is not easily achievable. In my interpretation, it implies a different conception of objectivity, and a constant exercise to keep the dangers of ontological sclerosis in the perspectival character of truth in mind. I suggest a better way to its understanding through an enquiry into Whitehead's processual conditioned and «provisional realism», by which, I believe Naess has been deeply influenced.

5. *Whitehead's organicistic critique to substance and quality*

> In the past, the *objectivist* position has been distorted by the supposed necessity of accepting the classical scientific *materialism*, with its doctrine of *simple location*. This has necessitated the doctrine of secondary and primary *qualities*. Thus the secondary qualities, such as the sense-objects are dealt with on subjectivist principles. This is a half-hearted position which falls an easy prey to subjectivist criticism. If we are to include the *secondary qualities in the common world*, a very *drastic reorganisation* of our fundamental concept is necessary.[40]

The reorganisation of our fundamental interpretation of nature is the core intention of Whitehead's original synthesis of an organicistic and relational concept of nature. The dualism of *matter* and *spirit*, constituting the direct outcome of the materialistic point of view which permeates our culture, is unequipped to give expression to the concrete character of nature. In his wording, somewhere between these two extremes, «the concepts of life, organism, function, instantaneous reality, interaction, order of nature» form a true «Achilles heel»[41] of scientific materialism. A philosophy of nature, instead should assert a more concrete intuition of our universe, dealing with the problems of «value» and «internal relation», attempting to displace scientific

[39] «Humankind is the first species on earth with the intellectual capacity to limit its numbers consciously and live in an enduring, dynamic equilibrium with other forms of life. Human beings can perceive and care for the diversity of their surroundings. Our biological heritage allows us to delight in this intricate living diversity. [...] A global culture of a primarily techno-industrial nature is now encroaching upon all the world's milieux, desecrating living conditions for future generations. We - the responsible participants in this culture - have slowly but surely begun to question whether we truly accept this unique, sinister role we have previously chosen.» Naess, A., *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, *cit.*, p. 23.

[40] Whitehead, A.N., *op. cit.*, p. 113. My emphasis.

[41] *Ivi*, p. 71.

materialism with «important consequences in every field of thought».[42] The problem is not raised by scientific knowledge *tout court*, but it manifests itself in particular procedures, and thinking is extended out of functional advantage to become the «instinctive tone of thought» which forms the unexpressed assumptions of a cosmology. Although the cosmology of the west has not been brought on untouched from the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century (when this work was written), Whitehead makes an important point about the reasons it should still be considered unsurpassed and why philosophy still needs to deal with its fundamental elements:

> In the first place we must note its astounding efficiency as a system of concepts for the organisation of scientific research. In this respect, it is fully worthy of the genius of the century which produced it. It has held its own as the guiding principle of scientific studies ever since. It is still reigning. Every university in the world organises itself in accordance with it. No alternative system of organising the pursuit of scientific truth has been suggested. It is not only reigning, but it is without a rival. And yet – it is quite unbelievable. This conception of the universe is surely framed in terms of high abstractions, and the paradox only arises because we have mistaken our abstractions for concrete realities.[43]

Something is missed out. This becomes clear as soon as we consider our immediate or intuitive life experience. Indeed the materialistic cosmology he refers to counts on two main historical axioms: *simple location* and the substance-quality categories. The first one roots its ancient origins in the idea that nature is ultimately made of a substance, or matter, whose quality is «simple location» in space and time. The fundamental elements of reality are theorised differently but still interpreted ultimately as bits of matter just located in a definite region of space and in a definite duration of time. Whitehead's thesis, instead, maintains that «among the primary elements of nature as apprehended in our immediate experience, there is no element whatever which possesses this character of simple location».[44] The equalisation of maximum abstraction with the maximum of objectivity is what he notoriously terms *The Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness*.[45] The first problem springing from *simple location* is that it makes any philosophically significant concept of relation in nature unavailing. The second issue is it results in another manifestation of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, namely the categories of substance and

[42] *Ivi*, p. 47.
[43] *Ivi*, p. 69.
[44] *Ivi*, p. 72.
[45] See *ibidem*.

quality. These categories subsist the materialist account of experience avoiding any vulnerability potentially coming from our concrete intuitive experience, through a process of reduction or suppression of what appear to be irrelevant details. In Whitehead's examination of qualities, then, this disturbing outcome becomes clear. More specifically the «simplified editions» through which we picture our experience leave out in the world only «entities of a high degree of abstraction».[46]

The real problem is represented by the account of secondary qualities. The question of their reality cannot be satisfied by an indication of accidental nature which we, as observers, can predicate for the substratum in front of us. The debate has been ongoing since early modern times. If Whitehead's proposal is correctly understood, the argument is still topical not only because it touches a fundamental universal philosophical issue, but also because, even in criticism, we still think and represent the problem of experience within that very cosmology and within that very ultimate conceptualisation. This is a difference which is worth pointing out in respect to Naess's criticism on the same inquiry: while Naess seems to suggest to extend and de-rank qualities (admitting, for example, tertiary qualities as extremely complex ones), Whitehead will put forward a whole new set of concepts which endeavours to completely avoid the usage of the criticised categories in organicism.[47]

Hence, not many convincing alternatives can help us avoid the task of dealing with Galileo's exposition of sense-qualities as non existent apart from the presence of the observer, or Locke's newtonian interpretation of external reality as mere motion of material, mysteriously exercising a power to affect the subject with resulting blueness or noisiness. Most importantly, we cannot forget our obligated confrontation with Descartes's idea that «by our senses we know nothing of external objects beyond their figure [or situation], magnitude, and motion»,[48] enforcing a subjectivist foundation of experience and the irreparable subject-object dichotomy («although the things which I perceive or imagine are perhaps nothing at all apart from me, I am nevertheless assured that those modes of consciousness which I call perceptions and imaginations, in as far only as they are modes of consciousness, exist in me»[49]).

The point made by Whitehead is not about choosing objectivism over subjectivism insofar as the distinction bears the fundamentals of materialism. Organicism is, however, an alternative, non compatible position whose

[46] *Ivi*, p. 66.

[47] The outcome is, in my opinion, extremely effortless, plain and convincing. The acknowledgement that a greater credit has not been accorded to the depth and originality of this thinker is cause of surprise and discomfort.

[48] Descartes quoted *ivi*, p. 68.

[49] Descartes quoted *ivi*, p. 175.

fundamental starting point refuses the dichotomy of spiritual and material substances. Hence, «the technical phrase "subject-object" is a bad term for the fundamental situation disclosed in experience»,[50] implying, again, the reference to a metaphysical entity underlying the objects. The alternative proposed by Whitehead is far more complex than what is possibly accountable here. We can try to understand some important tenets of his organicism beginning with the idea that the organism occupies the locus of the fundamental plan of natural «reality». Its description includes dimensions of internal relation, impermanence, holism and processuality. Instead of objects we should think of «actual occasions», as synthetical *prehensions* or unities of relations, in a processual reality, which can contingently include perception and cognitive activity (*apprehension*), but do not need a mind substance to overcome any atomistic character. Whitehead's activity of prehension in the constitution of the actual occasion can be closely associated with Naess's concept of «self». In both cases, a synthetic centrality is not possible but through the inclusion of aspects of «others» in themselves. The content of a prehension is the event whose unity is very different from the material object in space, realising its processual life as a larger realised concrete space-time unity which has its determinations in time-and-space relations. The event/organism is the basic unit in nature. Objects will, then, be defined not by qualities but by relations: for example «changing», «enduring» and «eternal» objects will constitute actual occasions's prehensions on the time plane. An organic unity represents the key of our access to the world, by unifying in its bodily life all aspects of the universe. What organicism does is to «edge cognitive mentality away from being the necessary substratum of the unity of experience. That unity is now placed in the unity of an event. Accompanying this unity, there may or there may not be cognition».[51] The previously called *secondary qualities*, then, certainly affect «subjects». «They are modifications of the subject, but only in their character of conveying aspects of other subjects in the community of the universe. Thus no individual subject can have independent reality, since it is a prehension of limited aspects of subjects other that itself».[52] It is important that we do not read this account of subject as a synonym for «mind» or «consciousness» and take into consideration the predominant passive character of the subjective life. Events, be them human organisms or far smaller organisms like electrons, have a relational character on the space-time reference. They are transient, both in their impermanence as inherent transience and in their possession of aspects of other «things» in their very constitution. These are not two separate events, a temporal and a space

[50] *Ivi*, p. 188.
[51] *Ivi*, p. 114.
[52] *Ivi*, p. 188.

linear procession of discrete entities: «however we fix a determinate entity, there is always a narrower determination of something which is presupposed in our first choice. Also there is always a wider determination into which our first choice fades by transition beyond itself».[53]

Important outcomes can be drawn from Whitehead's organicism for the purpose of gathering critical elements of the relation between our worldview and our attitudes towards nature. I will try to suggest three.

First of all, materialism bears dualist consequences which develop in a unjustifiable and contradictory anthropocentrism. The west, indeed, as Whitehead points out, seems to retain a bizarre inconsistency, simultaneously retaining two opposite attitudes:

> A scientific realism, based on mechanism, is conjoined with an unwavering belief in the world of men and of the higher animals as being composed of self-determining organisms. This radical inconsistency at the basis of modern thought accounts for much that is half-hearted and wavering in our civilisation.[54]

A second implication has to do with a definition of the environment as intrinsic to organisms. From an understanding of physical objects in terms of «endurance» or a process of inheritance of pattern from itself for a certain longer or shorter time («permanence»), it is easily concluded that objects can be considered independent from the environment, bearing their own principle within their own pattern. Whitehead argues, however, that such a conclusion has no justification because what is transmitted is not a pure pattern, but a «complete pattern which include the influence of the environment on [...] antecedents parts of the life of the object».[55] The life of an object is different from its simple duration, and what is permanent, (or less impermanent, I would say), is the continued change through transmission of the aspects of antecedent life, that are the relations of its life model to other surrounding events. From this observation, we must, then, conclude that «a favourable environment is essential to the maintenance of a physical object»,[56] in virtue of relations which endure in the very transmission of the object's constitution, during the whole duration of his «specious present». This is valid both among organisms of shorter permanence, interacting and cooperating, but also in respect to organisms of great endurance – mountains or other elements of nature we usually consider

[53] *Ivi*, p. 116.
[54] *Ivi*, p. 94.
[55] *Ivi*, p. 137.
[56] *Ibidem.*

inert. Consequently, «any physical object which by its influence deteriorates its environment, commits suicide».[57]

A third important outcome is the deduction of the place of value within organicism. From a relational theory of organisms as interpenetrating events,[58] Whitehead deduces a theory of value as a means of understanding the actual concrete relations among realised events. In his system, if we limit ourselves to the indication of an *event* through the characterisation of its transience combined with its unity, we are still offering an abstract account of the event itself. The full concrete account of the nature of the event, leaving out nothing of its nature, is impossible through the use of one single idea, «but conversely, nothing must be left out».[59] Whitehead suggests that through *value* we can understand an important dimension of the event as related to other events or organisms, as the characterisations render the actual difference in totality:

> Remembering the poetic rendering of our concrete experience, we see at once that the element of value, of being valuable, of having value, of being an end in itself, of being something which is for its own sake, must not be omitted in any account of an event as the most concrete actual something. «Value» is the word I use for the intrinsic reality of an event. We have only to transfer to the very texture of realisation in itself that value which we recognise so readily in terms of human life.[60]

A relational unity, then, differentiates both from a mystical unity and from an external purposeless set of things defined by material qualities, through the means of value as the record of internal concrete «relational weight». Hence, «in abstraction from actuality, the eternal activity is divorced from value. For the actuality is the value».[61]

I believe that this account of relational value in nature does not relieve us from the task of ethical reflection on our relation to natural objects. Event, as a unit of realised experience, under the aspect of its full concreteness includes: the so called subjective life, memories, thinking and imagination.[62] This is not just a

[57] *Ivi*, p. 138.

[58] «a non-materialistic philosophy of nature will identify a primary organism as being the emergence of some particular pattern as grasped in the unity of a real event. Such a pattern will also include the aspects of the event in question as grasped in other events, whereby whose other events receive a modification, or partial determination. There is thus an intrinsic and an extrinsic reality of an event, namely, the event in its own prehension, and the event as in the prehension of other events. The concept of an organism includes, therefore, the concept of the interaction of organisms». *Ivi*, p. 130.

[59] *Ivi*, p. 116

[60] *Ibidem.*

[61] *Ivi*, p. 132.

[62] See *ivi*, p. 212.

matter of description in philosophy of nature, but an active, practical task included in experience. Every description of these cognitive aspects of experience make them an abstraction, just as every account of qualities is as well. Experiencing value means understanding the actual modes of relation of events with the emerging primary event for us, which is our own organism.Whitehead's organism can offer a strong argument against the subjectivism of value and a ground for the understanding of intrinsic value in nature on the basis of the very interpenetration of realised events or «actual occasions».[63]

A final remark should be made: Whitehead's account of nature is not simply interchangeable with the concept of nonhuman nature, wilderness or any other determination of the natural «green» environment.[64] The definition of the natural environment is another complex task, which in part overlaps the problem of perspectivism as outlined earlier. Whitehead, however, offers an interesting perspective through which we can rethink our relationship towards the world and a concept of nature in an «environmental» sense could be developed beginning with a similar outlook. Objectivist inquiries in nature like the ones attempted by Naess's gestalt ontology or by Whitehead's organicism are misunderstood if they are mistaken for appeals to an original, pre-subjective, mystical idea of nature.[65] Appealing to a concrete account of our experience of nature deals with a relational definition of both subjectivity and the natural world, instead of looking for a noumenal nature onto which value is based. The «good» anthropomorphic idea of nature offered by Jonas's account of organism

[63] An example of Whitehead's idea of experience of value can be found at *ivi*, p. 212: «So far I have merely been considering an actual occasion on the side of its full concreteness. It is this side of the occasion in virtue of which it is an event in nature. But a natural event, in this sense of the term, is only an *abstraction* from a *complete actual occasion*. A complete occasion *includes* that which in *cognitive experience* takes the form of memory, anticipation, imagination, and thought. These elements in an *experient occasion* are also modes of inclusion of complex eternal objects [such as qualities] in the synthetic prehension, as elements in the emergent value». This passage can exemplify one interpretation of the «objective intrinsic value» to which Naess refers: value is patently experienced by a moral subject, but it is as part of the experienced event, in the objectivity of the processual actual occasion, instead of being projected from a moral separate dimension onto a physical one.

[64] A useful reference may be to Hailwood's distinction between "overall nature" and "non-human nature", which, in turn, refers to a traditional distinction where "nonhuman nature" is non artificial, non transformed for human purposes nature, and "overall nature" is a reference to a wider world to which we relate. Hailwood, S., *Estrangement, Nature and "the Flesh"*, unpublished.

[65] See Naess, A., *A Defense of the Deep Ecology Movement*, «Environmental Ethics», 6, 1984, p. 269. In the article, Naess argues that appealing to categories like *equilibrium* or *harmony* is not adequate as it does not take into consideration the historical modification to ecosystems which are cause by all species, humans included.

can be a useful contribution to an ecological consideration of environment and personal identity.

6. Ipse *and relation: the identity of organism in Hans Jonas*

> The anathema on any kind of anthropomorphism, even on zoomorphism, in connection with nature – this in its absoluteness specifically dualistic and postdualistic prohibition, may well turn out to be, in this extreme form, a prejudice. Perhaps, rightly understood, man *is* after all the measure of all things – not indeed through the legislation of his reason but through the exemplar of his psychophysical totality which represents the maximum of concrete ontological completeness known to us: a completeness *from which*, reductively, the species of being may have to be determined by way of progressive ontological subtraction down to the minimum of bare elementary matter.[66]

Neither Naess and Whitehead seem interested in drawing a primary distinction between life and the non-living, and argue for a wider approach to the living, and for a gradual difference in nature. Their approaches include elements of distinction – «internal structures» of gestalts in Naess; value and endurance in Whitehead. Nevertheless Jonas shows a different approach, constructing an original idea of organism on the very differentiation of living and non-living. His account can cast an interesting light on the understanding of the nature of self in relation to nature from the starting point of philosophical biology.

Jonas argues that the spirit-matter dualism «created forever a new theoretical situation»,[67] which dominates still unsurpassed our categories of thinking. Questions of being and non-being, life and death, spirit and body are clearly accounted throughout the whole history of humanity. Only beginning with modern age, however, according to Jonas, dualism fixed in an irreversible reduction, an «ontology of death»: the natural world has been stripped of all its vital characters. The outstanding development of modern science took advantage of the theoretical freedom offered by the *res extensa*. In materialist mechanism, indeed, the beholder subject is free from the pressure and the proximity of the world and can freely study his objects. With Descartes, then, dualism passed a fundamental threshold in the history of philosophy.

According to Jonas, this situation is constantly exposed by the experience of the living organism, which has always represented a critical and unsolved point in the narrations of the philosophy of nature. The problem of secondary

[66] Jonas, H., *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.
[67] *Ivi*, p. 16.

qualities, in Jonas, exposes this difficulty, namely the uneasy reduction of the organism:

> The scientific advantage of dualism was, at its briefest, that the new mathematical ideal of natural knowledge was best served by, and indeed required, the clear-cut division between two realms which left science to deal with a pure *res extensa*, untained with the nonmathematical characters of being. That reality *in toto* was not of this one desirable kind had been realized by Galileo, whose doctrine of the mere subjectivity of the «secondary qualities» (the expression is Locke's) initiated the extrusion of the undesirable features from physical reality. But subjects themselves are objective entities within reality, and the extrusion of features remained incomplete so long as their dumping-ground itself was part of the world to be described by natural science.[68]

In his account, the unsolved debate about how our mind is affected by external bodies raises at least one important issue: the separation of the subjective life from our experience of the external world affects at the same time our own body. Our organism, instead, is the key to our openness to the world. It is the fundamental dimension of our access to reality through the totality of our psychophysical experience. Dualism can only offer partial and barely convincing accounts of it.

The first dramatic outcome of dualism is, then, the removal of the relation from reality. The expulsion of the subjectivity from a world of discrete entities leaves the *percepta* mute, and their affection to the senses needs to be explained through external subjectivist activities. The nature of the removed relations is of different kinds: it includes causal, teleological and value relations. They all are indeed, practical dimensions which cannot be accounted by a frontal observer external to the world. The way Jonas argues about the epistemological and cognitive origin of our separation from the natural world is one of the most thought provoking parts in *The Phenomenon of Life.* The enigma of perceptive neutrality is accounted through three genetical and phenomenological arguments:[69]

a) Our senses simply operate on a human-organism scale.

> The smallness (in dimension, time rate, and energy) of the unit-actions and reactions involved in the affection of the senses, i.e., relative to the organism, permits their mass integration into one continuous and homogeneous effect (impression) in which not only the single impulses are

[68] *Ivi*, p. 54.
[69] See *ivi*, pp. 26-33.

> absorbed, but the character of impulse as such is largely canceled and replaced by that of detached image.[70]

Experience is reduced to image. The world affects us only externally, in a safety feeling that removes the fear of dependence and danger of the worldly dimension. The experienced world becomes a world of perceived presences, although on a non-human scale we can only find a «world of forces». A form of prejudice and anthropocentrism is revealed in the critique, at least an ideological version of anthropomorphism: the idea that our reason defines the range of the existent.

b) From the suppression of the causal sense affection of the object on the subject (the removal of the *object→subject* relation), two further relations are expelled from experience: the theoretical causal relation between discreet objects (*object→object*) and the practical relation of the agent towards and within the world (*subject→object*). This is how, according to Jonas, the self as observer originally separates from the agent self. Here it is also located the irreversible dichotomy between (natural) facts and (human) value.

c) The removal of causality extends the objectification process both to knowledge and to reality. Instead of offering an account of the complexity of the phenomenon and of its existential risk, experience is appeased in the verifiable, comparable abstraction of image.

Jonas suggests to abandon the metaphysical point of view of dualism and to regain the primacy of relation in experience through a rediscovery of our body. Our own psychophysical totality is the basic unity of experience and it is the only key for a non objectifying access to the world. The proposed critique may bear important consequence on our identity, our life and on a different account of the dignity of the natural world. Relation is a practical matter in regard to the organism, which does not admit the separation between the knowing and the acting subject:

> [...] *without* the body and its elementary self-experience [...] there could be no idea whatever of force and action in the world and thus of a dynamic connection of all things: no idea, in short, of any «nature» at all. [...] But whichever causality it be, on his point Hume's critique was right that it is not met with in any perception, and that the nexus between the data is not a datum, but an «actum».[71]

The concrete unity of organism directly experiences the force of causality. Organism, in its practical dimension, is continuos activity of self-transcendence.

[70] *Ivi*, p. 29.
[71] *Ivi*, p. 25.

This is shown in Jonas's exposition of metabolism as the first irrefutable trace of intrinsic relation between selves and nature. Metabolic processes are common to all living beings, from the simplest to the most complex. They are accountable as a vital and constant exchange of matter and energy with the environment. The relation of organism to the surroundings cannot be external because it involves a constant and necessary changing of its material identity. Every single cell of its body is constantly replaced with external material. It is in no case comparable to Descartes's «animal automaton». The basic relations of metabolism are necessary to the constitution of a more complex dimension: the organic identity.

Only relations to the natural world provide a solution to the problem of identity. The world sets our experience. Identity itself is not *the other* of relation. «Self» is not *the other* of the world. Jonas defines organic identity through the idea of the «antinomy of freedom». The living occupies a paradoxical position, where the maximum of freedom – from the active manipulation of matter to self conscious existence – corresponds to the maximum of need and dependence on the world. Hence organic identity is a process made of two simultaneous aspects: the «challenge of selfhood» and relation. Life is self transcendent because there can be no life without an intrinsic relation to the world. «Selfhood» is being always in the world. It is openness to otherness because its very identity is defined within an horizon of relations. And the more complex the organism, the more its dependence on the world grows. The more one's capacities of individualisation and specification grow, the more his needs will grow, and the more his relations will multiply in order to satisfy his needs.

Jonas's organism, then, opens an understanding of the natural world which overcomes the primacy of perception and calls for a more fundamental relationality. The cognitive element has been overestimated in the metaphysical position of dualism. The body is our basic key of access to the world through concrete organic experience. The cognitive experience is not ruled out, but it is considered among superior capacities, and in this respect it is not the fundamental dimension of our relation to the world.

The appeal goes to a renewed attention towards our practical and bodily dimension in our approach to our identity, which immediately discovers itself as relational. From this standpoint, a closer consideration of the natural world is possible.

> Ontology as the ground of ethics was the original tenet of philosophy. Their divorce, which is the divorce of the «objective» and the «subjective» realms, is the modern destiny. Their reunion can be effected, 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 be elicited a destination of man by whose terms the person, in the act of

> fulfilling himself, would at the same time realise 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.[72]

7. Practical conclusions

The problem of secondary qualities, although rising within modern cosmology, epitomises the deep chasm between subject and object which results in the predominance of a materialistic and dualistic worldview. The authors I presented emphasise the necessity of overcoming this fundamental separation through an attempt of rethinking nature in relational, processual and organicistic terms. Rethinking our experience of nature bears reference both to the nature of our identity and the status of the natural world.

The appeal to a more concrete approach to experience has several implications for environmentalism. In lieu of the primacy of «spirit» and purely speculative mind, concreteness stands for the complexity, conditionality and contextual character of subjective life as the basic reference of our approach to the world and our understanding of it. Concreteness also includes a critique of representation in terms of constant awareness about the inevitability of abstract categories in the analysis and classification of the world, as well as their anthropomorphic character.

The first ethical aspect of an ontological and relational approach to environmental issues consists of an exposure of the insufficiency of a direct extension of intra-human ethic to non-human nature. Simple moral extensionism fails to critically engage with the crisis of the image of a rational, separate and independent moral subject, autonomously making decisions over neutral objects, basing them on a mastering position (although of humanistic care). The crisis of our relation to nature, on the contrary, calls into question the status of our very personal identity and the one of the world. The idea of intrinsic relation determines a whole new field of interconnections and conditions within our sense of reality.

Furthermore, both the «subjective» and the «objective» sides are interested by a double process of weakening and expansion. In place of substances we find events, prolonging the relations relevant to their own constitutive identity both in time and in space dimensions. On one side our subjectivity emerges as conditioned and dependent on the natural world. On the other side, world may emerge in different, unexpected and uncontrolled forms if we acknowledge this possibility. Expansion of identity corresponds to a weakening of identity itself

[72] *Ivi*, p. 283.

as fixed, separate, defined and independent: at the centre of the relational knots we can find «selves» which can only be understood as relational and processual. Individuals will be recognised as centres of interest, declining the idea of a neutral position from which they observe the world. At the same time, their own interests will be identified as so wide that they non-arbitrarily include others' interests and the right to flourish. Furthermore, from an organicistic perspective, the horizon of the intrinsic relation with others tends towards totality. As Whitehead affirms, «[his] theory involves the entire abandonment of the notion that simple location is the primary way in which things are involved in space-time. In a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times. For every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location. Thus every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world».[73]

From a practical point of view, this dimension offers a basis for an understanding of value in relational and objective terms. Being always, already, intrinsically related includes the experience of value in the very constitution of things surrounding us. Moreover, the discovery of this interpenetration offers a practical call which is always already there. It revokes the possibility of an idea of self-realisation excluding or impeding others' flourishing, since every act of domination and exploitation extends its consequences over the limits of a transcendent world, turning into a self-infliction of the very same abuse. Endorsing the denial of this wider idea of conditioning is only possible at the price of a removal and reductional operation. The practical call of relationalism, then, highlights the non-sustainability of the anthropocentric prejudice. It operates a decentralisation of the position of humanity, re-centring subjectivity in a net of intrinsic relations. Abandoning the anthropocentric prejudice is an immediate counterpart of the critical question about identity. Otherness and identification become the two poles of the problem of identity when we discover ourselves as entangled, conditioned and conditioning. On one side relationalism opens to a feeling of identification, since we discover that «the other» is intrinsically constitutive for our identity. In the holistic intrinsic relation, a sense of sharing a common destiny is also brought to light, by which «other» might not be completely other from us. On the other side, perspectivism and the relational self as a centre of expanded interests leave room for the emergence of other centres of interest, whose importance and value cannot be resolved by our subjectivity. We find ourselves in the position of stepping back, by virtue of the very acknowledgment of the finitude of our anthropogenic and particular perspective, and accept «otherness» as difference, without manipulating nor objectifying its being.

[73] Whitehead, A.N., *op. cit.*, pp. 113-114.

Taking over the challenge of overcoming the anthropocentric prejudice through interconnectedness cannot directly bear standard ethical norms. Primarily, it produces a pre-ethical attitude, a practical immediacy, through which the different unities of subjectivity and objects can emerge. By virtue of this «letting be» a dialogue can be open for further normative agreement and decision making. This may become clearer when we take into consideration the most delicate issues concerning the human relationship to nature. I am thinking, for instance, of the problem of human overpopulation, one of the biggest subjects of denial in our present situation. How could we accept any set of prescriptions formulated by a task force of rational thinkers? Any of the proposed solutions could be liable to be considered either antihumanistic, or antilibertarian, or ecofascist. Nevertheless, the problem is there, growing exponentially, no matter whether we ignore it or not. Only a deeper awareness of our environmental identity and dependance on the natural world can build a basis for further normative agreement. This requires the acknowledgment that particular prejudices and interests influence our incapacity of even looking at the problem. It consequently requires the opening up of dialogue and the inclusion of what is different from our restricted ego. The real challenge is the development of a pre-ethical attitude towards the world, where respect of diversity – due to a modesty of the awareness of our finitude – and feeling of nearness – as everything in the world shares a common destiny due to our interconnectedness – are not in opposition. If we can do this, some optimism can arise in the face of our contemporary environmental challenges.

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