

Towards a Polycentric Humanism

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The possibility of a conception of the world that might question western anthropomorphism basically began to be entertained from the second half of the 20th century, though what we could call ‘the intellectual atmosphere of Romanticism’ had already hinted at a similar concept as a reaction to tendencies that were far too one-sided and one-dimensional. A critique of western anthropomorphism has thus been tenuously articulated since Romanticism in the first half of the 19th century; however, I think the need to give this critique some substance and immediacy, a practical ethical relevance, was identified in the second half of the 20th century when it started to become obvious that certain grand utopian models developed in the West had created antibodies so dangerous they were jeopardizing life itself.

Fundamentally the modern western outlook has been constructed around two myths: the myth of the conquest of paradise through progress, and the myth of the conquest of paradise through social emancipation or egalitarian revolution. On the one hand the failure of the communist revolution, which led to the gulag and internment camps, and on the other the dark clouds created by the myth of progress via events as totally destructive as Hiroshima and Nagasaki (which for the first time gave a glimpse of the destruction of the world by the hand of mankind rather than a god or nature) underlined the need for a reassessment. In a more general sense this need has been ideologically embodied and expressed in what might be called ecological thinking. Though that thinking often contains infantile elements and exaggerations that do not always make it acceptable, its demand can be understood for a new relationship between mankind and nature and a fresh bond between human beings and other living things.

Western and in particular modern tradition has always been at bottom anthropocentric; it has needed to emphasize mankind’s role as lord of life, going so far as to focus on human beings’ place at the centre of the world. With the scientific approach modern humans have carried out a kind of colonization of the rest of nature and of life, in which their interest alone makes any sense. One of the prophets

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of the modern revolution, Francis Bacon, proclaimed mankind's need to achieve complete dominance over nature. Thus the old leaning towards anthropocentrism, which already existed in the ancient world, has grown more conspicuous in the modern world since humans turned themselves into colonizers of everything not human, which includes organic and inorganic matter.

Nevertheless I think that conception has reached a crisis period since the second half of the last century and especially in the final third, and we are seeing some of the founding ontological principles of western humanity being overturned. But this crisis does not mean that we are being offered alternative psychic models, since the anthropocentric inheritance is so deep-rooted in the West that we can scarcely imagine that people could come to think in non-anthropocentric terms.

I would in any case like to single out three great moments in this western anthropocentrism that have formed us historically. The first comes to us from Greek philosophy, summed up in its anthropocentric phrase that we all learnt in school: 'Mankind is the measure of all things.' A second formulation, of Judeo-Christian origin, states that humans are chosen by God (for Jews, Israel has been chosen by God, for Christians it is humanity), which assumes mankind is the absolute protagonist, for better or worse. Finally, as we have seen, there is the Renaissance, for which mankind is the centre of the world in 'the Great Chain of Being'. The great Renaissance humanists, Giovanni Pico de la Mirandola and Ficino, mention this interconnection but point to humanity as the central link that in a way directs the whole. Human beings can rise towards the angels provided they raise themselves spiritually, just as they can sink towards the beasts through their corruption, but there is no doubt that they are the centre.

To these three high points of western anthropocentrism I would add a fourth, which replaces the feeling of the human being's minuteness when faced with the infinite nature of the universe. After the scientific revolution of the Renaissance, humans were aware they were living on a planet that is merely marginal and saw themselves reduced to the position of grains of sand on an endless beach, as western poetry has frequently expressed it. As an antidote to this feeling they invented a fourth authentically anthropocentric formulation: mankind lording it over nature and the cosmos. If they cannot be its centre, they can at least dominate, colonize nature. The situation we find ourselves in is the direct legacy of this formulation: on one hand western mankind regularly expresses pride in the colonizing role that is backed up by technological progress, but on the other, since the second half of the 20th century and for the reasons I have set out above, this situation produces a counter-consciousness, awareness of the *hubris* of western anthropocentrism. The notion of mankind dominating and colonizing the non-human implies that we have overstepped all limits and crossed all boundaries, committing the sin of *hubris*, to use an ancient concept from Greek tragedy that has an evocative power without equal. Creating the conditions for self-destruction with the atom bomb constitutes the sin of *hubris*, even though that is an amazing expression of the colonizing role of mankind, who is even able to colonize the atom's nucleus and bombard it. The same phenomenon is occurring in the other great 20th-century revolution: the field of biology and genetics. In dominating and colonizing mankind appears able to realize elements of the old Promethean dream of creating human life, but there arises the fear of committing the sin of *hubris*.

I think this dual position – pride in our colonizing role that would mean we could colonize even the world of death, and on the other hand our fall into *hubris* and excess – is the great philosophical backdrop to the ethical, political and ideological debates that are currently running alongside developments in the field of biology and genetics. So we could say that the logic of knowledge in the West finally leads to a kind of two-sided position, a distant horizon that is getting continually clearer, which both makes us fall into the temptation of pride, arrogance as regards our ability to colonize and intervene in the non-human world and also create an awareness of *hubris* as a medium for ecological discourse about what exists that is better.

This awareness, or the ecological discourse starting from that principle, would counsel us to tend towards a non-anthropocentric alternative, or at least a non-egocentric one in the traditional sense of the word, towards a fresh relationship with non-human life. This is also the basis for all debates, for instance about the appropriateness of recognizing that animals have certain rights, animals seen not as machines but as sensitive beings with levels of consciousness that escape our understanding. This new relationship with nature and non-human living things recalls romantic discourse, especially elements borrowed from it and applied to our world, a world that has lived through the consequences of the great 20th-century scientific and technological revolution (the romantics thought western mankind was marching irrevocably towards a dehumanized nature or a denatured humanity).

This being the case, is it possible for mankind to transcend anthropocentrism philosophically, intellectually and artistically? That question, which other traditions would easily be able to answer, is extraordinarily difficult for the western tradition because, while acknowledging the needs I have just set out, human beings find it very hard to stand outside themselves. It is well-nigh impossible for them to think the relationship uniting them to life and the world from the perspective of another being. They can do so only from their own perspective and in this sense the only possible route to a solution transcending the colonizing approach would go by way of what we might call *self-contention*. Self-contention is a moral and ethical notion that could be an aesthetic idea as well, similar in a way to the ancient *sofrosyne*, which demanded moderation in the face of *hubris*: a moral self-contention to which an aesthetic character should be attributed in order to attain a new idea of balance and harmony. That is why re-using concepts such as the *soul of the world* might facilitate that balance between mankind and nature.

Furthermore, it seems inevitable that western humankind should shrink from totally transcending anthropocentrism (human beings are everything) in view of the upheaval that would be involved in what we might call an absolute *pan-cosmic chill* (human beings are nothing, grains of sand among other grains of sand). This latter position, which terrifies us in the extreme, would open the door to all sorts of insensitivities: social, ideological, political and moral. If humans are nothing more than grains of sand, why be concerned about our behaviour, good or bad? What possible role could mechanisms such as compassion, solidarity or fraternity have any longer?

I think we ought to commit ourselves to a middle way, a way of ethical self-contention and aesthetic harmonization in which, instead of seeing themselves as the absolute centre, human beings would recognize their peripheral function or role and would become not absolute conquerors but mediators. This ethical self-contention

and aesthetic harmonization would encourage them to think of themselves as mediators, as a bridge acting precisely on that cosmic correlation which, far from destroying and colonizing to satisfy their own egotism, would search for new forms of universal mediation. I emphasize the fact that this human self-contention, based not only on ethical criteria but also on aesthetic goals of harmony, would make it possible to develop an ethics of non-human life, an ethics affecting our relations with the non-human animal world, and would mean we could transcend our own fall into *hubris*, our own feeling of excess with regard to the 20th century.

The lessons drawn from the modern world lead us to conceive of the possibility of challenging and transcending human egocentrism. The dilemma is as follows: how can we carry through a critique of anthropocentrism without tipping over into the pan-cosmic chill?

Maybe we should attempt the experience of a middle way: trying on one hand to escape the most destructive consequences of the egocentrism favoured by western humanisms, which has led us to believe humankind should dominate and exploit life, but without falling, on the other, for the opposite vision, that pan-cosmic or pan-theistic view of nature that sees humans merely as cogs in the machine.

It may very well be that this middle way involves taking on board some lessons from the Renaissance, which thought of mankind as the connecting link between the different forms of life. Though we express ourselves from human consciousness, we could moderate the excesses spawned by this very consciousness, in particular its technological excesses. And so it might be that the figure we ought to argue about in the future would be, not that of mankind as the measure, the centre or the lord of all things, in accordance with the three forms of anthropocentrism we have listed, but rather the figure of human beings seeking mediation between forms of life, acting as intermediary between the various levels that make up existence.

With this in view it would perhaps not be far-fetched to revive the ancient notion of the Great Chain of Being in a contemporary guise. Granted, some metaphors will appear distant to us, like Shakespeare's when he relates human passions to the passions of the planets and atoms. But, despite the metaphor's anachronistic nature, this vision of humankind, not as an element isolated from nature but as a mediating element within it, may help us to go forward towards a new relationship with nature and the cosmos. In rejecting the temptation to see ourselves as the centre, we need to get used to the idea of a world made up of an infinite number of margins.

Therefore it would be a good idea to rethink our concepts of soul and *anima*: recovering awareness of a certain *animism*, not in its old sense but from a modern perspective, since if we accept that everything is marginal and that, at the most, we can claim the function of mediator, it is quite clear that we shall need to reintegrate certain images such as the *soul of the world*. It would not be surprising if science, by its own routes, ended up developing a new idea of animism. Then there might arise a world in which the human monologue would no longer dominate, nor would the human/non-human dialogue, but instead the idea of polyphony.

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