

## ***What Remains of Man and of the World: Reflections on the Age of Ecological Crisis***

Vallori Rasini

Dipartimento di Scienze del Linguaggio e della Cultura

Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia.

vallori.rasini@unimore.it

### **ABSTRACT**

Man and world look like residuals: human being is an organic remnant relic), as the survivor of a process of self alienation, in which the machine has been elected as a despot; world (or nature) is exhausted in the attempt to maintain a balance. The contemporary massive technological development seems supported by the idea that man is a *Homo faber* authorized to operate on nature without limits. This is the idea of a superior being with a dominant role in the world. The Judaic-Christian tradition has certainly promoted this idea; but it reproduces in another dimension the relations typical of the greek *oikos*: not justice, but authority and subordination for advantage the “head of the family”. Renouncing to want own the Earth (like an ordinary thing) can perhaps open the way for a new ethic.

### **KEYWORDS**

Nature, Human being, Technology, Ecology, Life

After centuries of traveling together through history, the relationship between mankind and nature has generated two distinctly different residues. On the one hand, an organic remnant as the survivor of a process of self alienation, in which the machine has been elected, perhaps definitively, as absolute despot. On the other hand, nature limps on exhausted, abused, and sometimes dramatically violent, like an agonizing body. Both residues are heading in the same direction, and it is the hand of man that irresistibly guides the way. It has always been man, with his productive impulse, his unstoppable creative vision, that opened the path for the advent of machinery, but that same technology has itself brought about an unexpected acceleration in its own development.

That man is characterized as *faber* (or ‘*creator*’ according to taste) more than any other being on earth, has been suggested for some time. The idea that human action can be defined as the essential feature of the last century has been vigorously upheld, and with valid reasons, by the philosopher and sociologist Arnold Gehlen. In his volume “*Man. His Nature and Place in the World*”<sup>1</sup> he sustains that man is affected by a series of fundamental biological deficiencies that

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Gehlen. *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (1940) trans. by C. Mainoldi ‘*L’uomo, la sua natura e il posto nel mondo*’ Milano, Feltrinelli 1983; now trans. by C. Mainoldi, edited by V. Rasini, Milano, Mimesis 2010

leave him devoid of the main morphological and instinctual devices required for survival. This leaves him exposed to “a profusion of stimuli which are completely alien to animal nature”, and forces him to “find his own defenses (Entlastungen) with his own tools and actions”, and to “transform conditions of deficit in his existence into the opportunity to preserve his life.”<sup>2</sup> In order to escape from the secular problem of a presumed duality between man and nature, Gehlen proposes resigning any claim to demonstrating spirituality, and dismisses the problem of the relationship between body and soul, in all its different forms. Gehlen poses the question as to whether it is possible to set aside all metaphysical issues and a large part of the speculative tradition of western thought, and adopt a different key theme for the study of man. Should this starting point be one that strongly adheres to empirical reality and that can be attested in the observation of facts? “With such a starting point” he concludes, “the principal role is played by action, that is, by the concept of man as a being, first and foremost, of agency.”<sup>3</sup>

It goes without saying this action will have a very specific connotation, must not be confused with that of other living beings, and must be identified with human nature without any possibility of doubt. The concept of action, Gehlen states clearly, designates “the activity directed towards the modification of nature in view of the purposes of man.”<sup>4</sup> The very marked intervention on nature helps man obtain an environment, for creating an ‘existential context’ in which he can find adequate conditions for survival, which, according to Gehlen, man certainly cannot find in nature”. It is through technical action (because this is the substance) that develops on different levels of existence (private, work, linguistic, symbolic-imaginative, etc.) that man is able to transfer himself into the cultural dimension and to structure his own life path step by step (a worthy descendent of Prometheus), using tools and methods which are always new and powerful in effect.

In a similar representation, the cultural dimension is separated and distanced from that of the dimension of nature to the extent that man is different from animals. The concept of nature encompasses the idea of animalism (and brutality), of organic needs. The concept of culture instead extends into the human universe as spiritually equipped, creative, imaginative, noble, free, and unique. Culture sublimates and redirects life’s requirements, conceding to man the privilege of variety of design: the options available for human survival are neither numerically or qualitatively inferior to the possibilities of the imagination.

This is Gehlen’s view (and not only his), and he underlines that human action, and therefore the way in which Man intervenes morally with nature, depends

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 74.

<sup>3</sup> A. Gehlen, *Anthropologische Forschung. Zur Selbstbegegnung und Selbstentdeckung des Menschen* (1961), trans. by S. Cremaschi, *Prospettive Antropologiche. L’uomo alla scoperta di sé*, edited by V. Rasini, Bologna, il Mulino, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

mainly on the way in which this being understands himself. “The need [...] to interpret one’s own human existence, he sustains, is not merely a theoretical need. According to the decisions implicit in such an interpretation, certain tasks are made visible or are hidden. That man is understood to be a creature of God or as a ‘successful’ monkey implies a clear difference in his behavior towards the facts of reality; in the two cases he will obey imperatives which are in themselves very different”<sup>5</sup>. The various visions of the world, the mythological and religious conceptions, all human knowledge, is always conditioned to some extent by the image that man has of himself, by the relationship that he believes he must or can have with other living creatures and with the universe. It is an anthropological conception, inclusive of an idea of provenance and destination, and any behavior derives from this point of view.

Throughout history many, often contrasting images of man have emerged, but within the limits of western culture at least one constant element can clearly be identified, characterizing man’s image of himself for centuries (and apparently still the case). This is the idea of a superior being authorized to play a dominant role in the world. The Judaic-Christian tradition has certainly favored this idea: the Holy Scriptures paint a picture of a man created in the image and likeness of God, superior therefore to any other being, and to whom the world has literally been given. From this starting point it is a short step to considering himself undisputed master of the world, playing this role unscrupulously to ensure his own interests are always satisfied.

As regards this image of mankind, certain reflections on the concept of *oikos* are interesting. The widely used term “ecology” is derived from this ancient Greek word, coined in the second half of the 19th century by the English biologist Ernst Haeckel, and with the sense of a science of relationships which involve organisms and environment. Considered according to its main meaning, *oikos* does not refer so much to the environment in the sense of ‘surrounding space’ or ‘place around’ (...) like, on the other hand, the German term *Umwelt*. Instead it means a precise system of relationships. In fact *oikos* means “home”, “family” (and by extension domestic heritage or ‘substance’) and it involves the management of one’s own environment, of something that ‘belongs’ to the person governing it. The main aspect of this concept therefore embraces an ‘owned’ (thing/house), an owner, and certain rules of inter-relationship .

Within the Aristotelian conception, *oikos* is the place in which the authority of a master is exercised over his slaves, as well as over his wife and children (although to different degrees). It is not a place in which justice can be upheld: justice in the full sense can only be dispensed between equals, for example free

---

<sup>5</sup> A. Gehlen. *L'uomo*, cit. pg. 45.

citizens of the polis<sup>6</sup>. However, the polis is a different domain, in which women, slaves, and children effectively do not take part. They do not participate in the government of the public sphere as family heads do. Due to their servile condition slaves do not enjoy political rights, women are considered "naturally inferior and in need of guidance", children are unqualified for the exercise of political virtue until they are able to obtain an oikos, and so become a family head. According to Aristotle, within the sphere of the oikos, authority directly pursues the interest of the householder and only accidentally the interests of those under his authority (because it is clear that damage to property always ends up being damage to the owner)<sup>7</sup>. It is therefore characteristic of domestic despotism that the master has primarily his own good in mind and puts that of the others in his domain in second place. The opposite would be an aberration. It would be anomalous and almost perverse to put the good of the owned, the interest of the subjects first, completely overturning the established order of a balanced system dependent on the specific nature of the related elements.<sup>8</sup> Instead it is concerned with the regulation of certain subjects "according to nature" and therefore taken for granted, obviously in this sense "right" (but wrong and deviant if appearing in the public sphere under the form of tyranny). In this governing structure, the aim is the conservation of the family domain itself and of its organization, the preservation therefore of a certain power hierarchy: "relationships emerge which establish precise reciprocal positions between the members of the oikos, ritualizing roles within a fixed property".<sup>9</sup> The transmission of rules comes through commands, because, "the collocation of a being, whether animate or inanimate within a relationship of command constitutes the very basis of its own existence."<sup>10</sup> It justifies and gives meaning to a being's presence in the oikos. Within this sphere, the oikonomia environment, only powerful authoritarian relationships and those of dependency can be found.<sup>11</sup>

Talking of oikos, Hannah Arendt offers other points for consideration. In her book, 'Vita activa' she focuses on power, both absolute and unchallenged, which throughout western antiquity the *pater familias* has held over his own home (his *dominus*). The distinction between public and private spheres marks the distance between the place of life preservation (of the individual and of the species) and the practice of political functions, participating freely in the government (in the

---

<sup>6</sup> See for example, the study by F. Calabi, *La città del oikos. La politica di Aristototele*, Lucca, Maria Pacini Fazzi edition. 1984, pg. 50

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle *Politica*, 1278 b, 34

<sup>8</sup> Cf. F. Calabi, *La città dell oikos*, cit. pgs. 19-20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pg.67

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 68

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 74-75

scope of the polis)<sup>12</sup>. The “pre-political force” of the head of the family held the strings of domestic power, acting as a social glue at the centre of the nucleus and at the same time it guaranteed the sacred confines of property, which were indispensable for entry into the public dimension, the reserve only of free men.<sup>13</sup> The nature of the sphere of patronal power and dominion of inequality is repeated for the family and Arendt underlines how, in the oikos, the use of force and violence is justified in the case of valid needs (conservative, biological, reproductive, etc.)<sup>14</sup> and how the sense of the rigidity of that order is exhausted within a precise private and well defined context. Now, Arendt continues, through the course of history there has been an extension of the domestic community and its organizational norms into the public sphere, including those “economic activities” which were previously conducted within the family sphere, becoming an increasingly collective issue, until, “in the modern world”, she argues in her expressive style, “the two domains converge constantly one with the other, like waves on an incessant current of the same life process.”<sup>15</sup>

It could possibly be sustained that a similar process of expansion and reproduction in the organization of the private domain has gradually embraced even the vast sphere of nature. We assume a generic concept of nature, as the set of beings and things which subsist independently of the existence of man (and of which man is not directly and uniquely the cause). An alternative is the proposal of Aristotle in his *Fisica*, when “nature is found in animals, and their parts, in the plants and basic elements, such as, for example, earth, fire, air and water”.<sup>16</sup>

In relation to these ‘beings of nature’ our behavior has assumed the characteristics of dominion over the subjects within it. As already stated, Judaic-Christian thought has certainly favored the idea of man who is entitled, (perhaps even obliged) to behave as the absolute lord over the earth, over a flora and fauna which is inferior to him in every way.<sup>17</sup> Man is authorized to “assign names”, marking every being as his property, establishing a hierarchy and dependence between beings, just as he is also authorized to exploit, consume, and squander. Within this view it makes no sense to imagine a duty to preserve the elements of nature in themselves, given as they were to man to rule over. The sole interest

---

<sup>12</sup> According antiquated thinking the expression ‘political economy’ is an aberration: the organizational modes of the domestic sphere of the oikos have nothing to do with politics, with the management of the public domain.

<sup>13</sup> H. Arendt, *The human condition* (1958) translation by S. Finzi, *Vita activa. La condizione umana*, introduction by A. Dal Lago, Milano, Bompiani, 2003, pgs. 23-24.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 23

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 25

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Fisica* II, i, 192b (translation by L. Raggiu, Milano, Rusconi, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> In the 1960s L. White Jr. brought linked the causes of contemporary ecological crisis to the Judeo-Christian concept of the world: *The historical roots of our Ecological Crisis*, “Science” 1967, vol. 155 pgs. 1203-1207

that can and must be pursued is that of the being gifted with reason, or indeed spirit, with an immortal soul. Man can only fulfill the interests of other beings of nature accidentally, since protection and care for the elements of the natural context always comes second to the interests of man himself, as he enjoys specific advantages, but is aware that he might subsequently suffer for his damage.

The protection of human interests is not limited to the maintenance of a status quo, of the possibilities of a delicate but superior species, or the survival of a being, naked and biologically devoid of defenses to the threat of a violent and forceful nature. It is not about the simple protection of human beings from continual aggression from the outside, but above all the wellbeing of the master. He who is strong in the knowledge that his own position and the availability of effective tools ensures continuous improvement in his own conditions of life. Effectively, why not progress? During the centuries of the so-called scientific revolution, the idea that the development of knowledge and the application of technology would progressively free man from need and permit the domestication of the hostile forces of nature has always been pervasive. (This long sequence begins with Francis Bacon and leads on to the heart of positivism and beyond, passing through optimistic scientists like John B.S. Haldane and onwards until our present day<sup>18</sup>).

In relatively recent times, Hans Jonas, greatly insisted on the profound change that happened in the relationship between man and nature on the basis of the idea of progress. In the past, oppressed by need and exhausted by fatigue, man proudly offended nature by carving out an artificial space, a protected enclave, relatively free from natural tyranny, within which he could establish a system of autonomous laws and hope for a more acceptable existence. The chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone*, considered to be an antique symbol for action, gives homage to the ability of man to use force and ingenuity, but in describing his work does not hide the arrogance of his eruption into nature, the profane violence of his invasion<sup>19</sup>. "The profanation of nature and the civilization of humanity go hand in hand."<sup>20</sup> Jonas affirms. But in this antique representation, man still remains fearful and reverent, his technology does not hurt nature to the core and the offense does not really damage, he remains substantially innocuous. With his incursions, man does not change the natural equilibrium and is limited to

---

<sup>18</sup> F. Bacon., *Nuovo organo*, Milano, Bompiani, 2002; J.B.S. Haldane, *Daedalus, or Science and Future* (1924), Italian translation *Dedalo o la Scienza e il futuro; Icaro o il futuro della scienza*, edited by M. Nacci, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1991.

<sup>19</sup> H. Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation* (1979), Italian translation *Il principio responsabilità. Un'etica per la società tecnologica*, Torino, Einaudi, 1990, pgs. 4-5; and *Technologie e responsabilità. Riflessioni sui nuovi compiti dell'etica* (1972), in *Frontiere della vita, frontiere della tecnica*, edited by V. Rasini, Bologna, il Mulino 2011, pgs. 125.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 127

maintaining the domain of necessity for his own life, conquering small spaces for survival. “The invulnerability of everything of which man’s disturbances can only scratch the surface, that is the fundamental immutable character of Nature in the cosmic order, was in truth the background of all business of mortal man, including his intromissions in this same order”<sup>21</sup>. The profound mutation that occurred over the centuries with the strengthening of technology produced a radical transformation of the ways and ability of man to intervene in nature. It concerns not only an increase in the incursions and their greater penetration, because modern technology has introduced a range of intervention and objectives which are so new as to be unimaginable in the past, and even the quality and the consequences of this aggression to nature have undergone a notable evolution. In fact, the change regards principally the balance of power and only indirectly its extension: while nature once represented a great danger against which man had to deploy forces, it now exhibits a critical vulnerability which was previously unimaginable. “This discovery”, affirms Jonas, “was surprising enough to lead to the concept and birth of ecology, even modifying the idea that we have of ourselves as a causal element within the widest system of things.”<sup>22</sup>

All this should at least lead one to rethink the behavior that man can or must assume towards nature. The extraordinary technological developments of contemporary times have resulted in a change that directly effects the impact of dominant human behavior (provided that man really can be defined as ‘dominant’) over the natural world. As even Jonas underlines, this development has undergone an incredible acceleration in the direction of growth, in the increase of technological strengthening (or self strengthening). Technologicalisation and mechanization (to quote Anders) are therefore at once the result and the means of the process of affirmation of man over his own earthly possessions. This phase of growth-development<sup>23</sup> determines a progressive and significant substitution of the natural with the artificial, of the organic with the inorganic<sup>24</sup>, a process leading to a dual outcome. On the one hand the monopoly over the world by man (in reality by his technological culture) and a loss of autonomy of nature. On the other hand

---

<sup>21</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. pg. 133

<sup>23</sup> The idea of socio-economic development is always linked to that of growth. Only the concept of sustainable development proposes an attempt at substituting growth with conservation. However, as we know, it is a fairly recent concept. For an analysis of this concept see, S. Latouche, *Survivre au développement* (2004), Italian translation by F. Grillenzoni *Come sopravvivere allo sviluppo. Dalla decolonizzazione dell’immaginario economico alla costruzione di una società alternativa*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2005, pg. 30

<sup>24</sup> This process has been underlined by Gehlen particularly in the volume: *Die Seele im technische Zeitalter* (1957), Italian translation *L’uomo nell’era della tecnica*, edited by M.T. Pansera, Roma, Armando 2003; however, G. Anders has revealed even more aberrant aspects: see *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* vol. 2 (1956 and 1980), Italian translation, *L’uomo è antiquato*, vol. 2, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2003, particularly vol. 1, part 1 pgs. 55.

the incorporation of man into a machine system which brings about the total alienation of his being from the biological anthropological dimension.<sup>25</sup>

In order to better understand what happens in this phase of overbearing expansion of the “cultural” domain and to achieve an accurate interpretation of current human conditions, it is useful to recall the view of Gunther Anders. According to his reading of the contemporary, it is perfectly appropriate to pose the anthropological question in residual terms: “What remains of man and of the world?”. Man has delegated to machines the role of protagonists in the modern world, he has acknowledged in them the perfection that no organic equipment could ever achieve, and he has abdicated the Promethean role of future planner, kneeling to the superiority of technology, to its strength and resistance, to its dynamics of autonomisation and force. Man is unsuited to the socio-economic dynamics that overwhelm him (the mega machine), and so is ontologically antiquated, has lost his grip on the world and on any real claim of possessing it, which has passed definitively into the power of the machine. No surprise then, that the outlook is the redefinition of man as a being “without a world”: he is consigned to the dynamics of the socio economic process and is by now seen only as an unconscious gear in an auto-productive system, which is subtle and perhaps unstoppable. He has shown a profound ineptitude in terms of management and his ability to control growth (which is nevertheless still sought after). This culpable incapacity in the face of his own technological products, this polyhedral “Promethean de-leveling” (which condemns him to inferiority, perhaps irrecoverably), this chronic and resigned inadequacy drags man to the edge of a very profound abyss: a world which could exist without man. Perhaps this is not even the worst scenario, it could be that together with man all forms of life might disappear (e.g. following a nuclear catastrophe).<sup>26</sup>

What should be done then in the face of such an outlook? Firstly, it is better to avoid taking minimizing or sardonic stances, which are generally poorly disguised behind a facade of arrogance, with a petty, irresponsible attitude. This is not an innocuous position: given the present situation, which is genuinely disconcerting, any superficial attitude is guilty of “inciting thoughtlessness”, of undervaluing or completely disregarding the concrete and serious dangers that humanity currently has to deal with.

---

<sup>25</sup> This double movement has only brought about development (really just apparent) in the West, but has involved the entire globe.

<sup>26</sup> As well as the two volumes of *L'uomo è antiquato* ‘, see the following for Anders: *Der Mann auf der Brücke. Tagebuch aus Hiroshima und Nagasaki* (1959) Italian translation by R. Solmi, *Essere o non Essere Diario aus Hiroshima e Nagasaki* (preface by N. Bobbio), Torino, Einaudi, 1961 ; *Mensch ohne Welt. Schriften für Kunst und Literatur* (1984), Italian translation; *Uomo senza mondo. Scritti sull'arte e la letteratura*, edited by S. Velotti, Ferrara, Spazio Libri Editori, 1991.



If even minimal consideration is given to the current international reports drafted by the most diverse agencies regarding the climatic, ecological, and social-economic situation (mostly of western countries), a serious call for individual and collective responsibility is inevitable. There is no reasonable motivation for encouraging a “farewell to nature” (with or without a capital N)<sup>27</sup>. On the contrary: it is essential to direct every force, even the simplest and blandest, towards the greatest possible respect for what we consider in the world to be natural (even naive) and extra-machine. Furthermore, it would be advisable to abandon that widespread idea of existential superiority (and of eternity), the idea that man almost has the obligation (his privilege being so great) to bend the elements to his own volition, the misleading and perverse belief in pursuing the good of the human species even while compromising the existence of other living beings. The earth should preferably be conceived as our common “home”. Finally, it is worth trying by any means to recuperate a “responsible humanism”, in other words a serious assessment of the many strengths of man, and his potentialities as a knowing and willing being. In brief, an effort should be made to reorganize human existence, with a “reorganicisation” (i.e. a reintroduction of the organic) and renaturalisation of life.

---

<sup>27</sup> *As for example the booklet by G. Marrone invites us to do, Addio alla Natura; Torino, Einaudi, 2011.*