**Life – a Cultural Ecology of Weltanschauungen**

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“The time of the *Homo Reflectus*, the self-critical and self-revising one, has surely come” (Deborah Bird Rose, 2015: 2)

*Humanism, Anti-humanism, Post-humanism*

Humanism is a worldview – it is a view on the world that expresses and reveals how human beings see themselves in the world. The self-understanding of the human being and its relations to the world – to the Gods, nature, others and self – changes over time. As the relations change, so does humanism. As an ethical and philosophical movement that emphasizes the value, agency and autonomy of human beings, humanism initially emerged as a movement of emancipation from within Christianism. Only later it turned against religion to assume radical atheist positions. With Didier Fassin (2019), we can distinguish three lineages within humanism. A first lineage, associated with the Renaissance, returns to ancient Greek and Roman thinkers to escape the dominant medieval, Christian tradition. This lineage is associated with the vindication of the humanities and the liberal arts (Humanism I: *Geisteswissenschaften*). The second lineage, associated with the Enlightenment, conceives of the human being as an autonomous creature, endowed with reason, language and tools, that defines and prescribes universal norms of dignity, equality and respect for humankind (Humanism II: Anthropocentrism). If the first lineage focuses on the humanities and the second on humanity, the third one has to do with moral sentiments of love, benevolence and sympathy that call for humaneness in the treatment of others (Humanism III: Humanitarianism). What has become problematic today is neither the association between humanism and the humanities nor its connection with philanthropy. What has become questionable is the smug anthropocentrism that places the human being at the pinnacle of the universe. Where God had once been, on top of the Great Chain of Being, humanism places Man as the capstone of Being. Man is not innocent, as Descartes and Kant want us to believe. Of late, the attacks by post-structuralists, feminists and post-colonialists have been complemented by stringent critiques from ecologists. Humanism is not only guilty of logocentrism, androcentrism and ethnocentrism. By granting the human being an exceptional position within the cosmos, nature and history as the “masters and possessors of nature”, it is also responsible for the destruction of (natural) nature on an industrial scale. Although the connection between anthropocentrism and the Anthropocene is mediated by colonialism (“Plantationocene”), capitalism (“Capitalocene”) and industrialism (“Machinocene”), humanism appears as a central plank of the coffin of a dying planet. The belief that the creature that caused all problems in the first place can solve them is typically humanist. Anti-humanists for their part would counter that if the big pandemic of 2020-2021 has shown anything, it is that the human species that destroys the environment is itself the virus (Macé, 2021: 50).

Humanism and anti-humanism are not static worldviews, however. They react to each other, are co-implicated and co-evolve – like the Enlightenment and Romanticism, liberalism and conservatism, the old Left and the Alt-Right (Mannheim, 1984). Humanism is, par excellence, a dialogical and dynamic worldview. Nothing is alien to humanism. It incorporates the anti-humanist critique and learns from it by questioning its own presuppositions. Thanks to the provocations of Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway and Dipesh Chakrabarty, to name just three privileged interlocutors who also talk among each other, humanism has been able to overcome at least some of it original “speciesism” and reconsider the role of non-human entities (animals and plants, things and spirits, robots and cyborgs) in shaping human experience. By attributing life to objects, sentience to plants and intelligence to animals, post-humanism distributes agency or actancy throughout through the ontological regions. Poised between the extremes of a technophilic accelerationism that shades into transhumanism and a technophobic deep ecology that borders on misanthropy, humanism had to reinvent itself in the last decade and relinquish “Man”. “‘Man’ does not mean humans”, clarifies Anna Tsing (in Haraway et al. 2016: 541), “but a particular kind of being invented by Enlightenment thought and brought into operation by modernization” (Anna Tsing). To come to terms with the ecological catastrophe, humanism had to become reflexive, self-critical and ecological. Ecohumanism is not a terminal contradiction. Like Critical Theory, which remains steeped in the anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment project (Rosa, Henning and Bueno, 2021), humanism also had to take its distance from its earlier productivist and positivist, naturalist and scientist hubris to learn some lessons from post-humanist challenges to its anthropocentrism. Unlike the anti-humanism of the structuralists (Lévi-Strauss and Lacan) and the post-structuralists (Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida), which wanted to erase the figure of the human in the sand, post-humanism claims to be “not so much against but beyond the human” (Fassin, 2023: 369). This facilitates dialogue.

In this paper, I will consider post-humanism from a humanist perspective. I will not consider post-humanism in general[[2]](#endnote-2), but a specific form of post-humanism that focuses on interspecies relations, communications and contacts and is associated with the “ontological turn” in anthropology (e.g. Charbonnier, Salmon and Skafish, 2017). It has coalesced in various disciplines (in the human sciences: anthropology, philosophy, geography, STS, gender studies, comparative literature, etc.; in the natural sciences: geology, oceanography, primatology, mycology, etc.), where it sails under various fantastical names: speculative realism, new materialism, panpsychism, multinaturalism, perspectivism, anthropology of life, etho-ethnology, multispecies ethnography. My approach will be humanist and draw on the three lineages I have delineated. With Wilhelm Dilthey, I will consider the new anthropologies from the perspective of the humanities as a worldview (*Weltanschauung*) and interpret the proposal to turn to nature *an sich* as a romantic expression of the human being’s nostalgia for a “resonant” world (Humanism I: Humanities). This cultural approach to nature is also humanist in its generosity (Humanism III: Humanitarianism). By extending the call for humane treatment to our brothers and sisters in nature, it deepens humanism, embraces nature and “makes kin” with other “critters” (Haraway, 2016). Finally, because of its ethical import, it is also humanist in the most problematic sense (Humanism II: Anthropocentrism). I will explore a multiplicity of world-relations that are not limited to interhuman relations. In the spirit of post-secular humanism, I will not dismiss post-humanism as such. Through dialogue, and in the earnest hope to overcome some of the limits of humanism, I will listen to its message and learn from it in a process of ecological *Bildung*. As I am not sure substituting anthropocentrism by biocentrism is possible, I will plead for a new anthropocentrism that is humanist and eco-centric. If nature changes, the human being must change as well and fully accept the burden of environmental stewardship. It is up to the Anthropos to revise the “position of (wo)mankind in the cosmos” by redefining its relations to itself, the socius, and nature.

*Life in the Anthropocene*

In 2000, Paul Crutzen, the Dutch Nobel-prize winning atmospheric chemist, and his American colleague, the biologist Eugene Stoermer, announced, somewhat prematurely it later turned out, the advent of the Anthropocene as a new time-interval in which the human becomes a significant “geological force”. Even if the human species were to disappear, they warned, “mankind will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years, to come” (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000: 18). They could have called the new era the “Technocene”; instead, they chose to put the Anthropos at the center of a more-than-human drama of telluric proportions. Overwhelming evidence now confirms that we, humans, have irreversibly changed the face of the Earth (Gemenne and Rankovic, 2021). Anthropogenic climate change, the erosion of biodiversity, the sixth mass extinction, deforestation, intensive farming, overfishing, desertification, acid rain, radioactive fallout, plastic oceans, biological invasions and pandemics, all these crises are interconnected in a planetary “polycrisis” that will only worsen and will not pass. It affects nature, society and history simultaneously.

As it is difficult for social scientists to think in eons and millions of years, we should perhaps follow Dipesh Chakrabarty (2021: 5-6) and make a distinction between the “geological Anthropocene” (leaving the Holocene epoch, the second stage of the Quaternary that started 2.6 million years ago ) and the “social Anthropocene” (which goes back only a few centuries, possibly a few decades). While the first is about rocks, crusts and fossils, the second is about humans and modernity. By inserting Earth history into human history, the social Anthropocene introduces large-scale ecological damage into world history and gives a planetary dimension to geopolitics. The destruction of the planet Earth over the last centuries has not only transformed the natural conditions of human survival; in the span of a few decades, the transformation of a “biological agent” into a “geological force” also has had a profound impact on the human self-conception.

By virtue of the unintended consequences of its own agency, the human species became aware of its own finitude. Although Chakrabarty (2021: 43) contests that we can ever experience the human species as such, I would contend that the Anthropocene has transformed humankind into a phenomenological category. This anthropic mutation is happening fast. In Brazil, for instance, where I am stationed, it happened over the last four years. The deforestation in the Amazon through illegal logging, mining and land grabbing under the Bolsonaro government and the images of carbonized jaguars and crocodiles in the burning wetlands of the Pantanal account for the sudden change of consciousness, which is also a change of heart. Horrified by the criminal destruction of the natural habitat of other species, urbanites cringed. Through sympathetic identification with the suffering of other lifeforms, they started to think of themselves as part of nature, as that part of nature that has become conscious of itself in-and-as nature, and reconsidered their relations and connections to their environment. The genocide of the indigenous populations during the Covid-19 pandemic and the humanitarian crisis of the Yanomami made them rediscover the ancestral wisdom of indigenous populations. *Ideas to postpone the end of the world* by Ailton Krenak (2020), an activist and spokesperson of the Krenak people, became an instant bestseller. Instead of posing themselves over and against the environment, as moderns, modernizers and developmentalists do, Brazilians sought inspiration in ancestral lore to reconnect to nature and feel part of a living, breathing, animated whole that transcends and includes them. As their souls communicate with nature, the mountains and the rivers, the birds and the butterflies, even the insects start to resonate within them and speak to them as it were in their own voice.

It is not just in Brazil that animism and vitalism have made a return. Elsewhere as well, we can see that a new philosophy of life has become popular. On a recent visit to a bookshop in Paris I noticed the following titles on display: “How Forests Think?”, “Being an Oak”, “The Intelligence of Plants”, “When the Mountains Dance”, “The Unconscious of Animals”, “The Diplomats. Living together with Wolves”, “The Ape Within”, “How to Speak Whale?”, “What if Animals Could Write?”, “In the Eye of the Crocodile”, “The Politics of the Pink Flamingo”.[[3]](#endnote-3) The roots of this series of books can be traced back to “Thinking like a Mountain”, a chapter in A *Sand County Almanac* (Leopold, 1949: 29-32) by Aldo Leopold, an American conservationist and pioneer of land ethics. They all suggest that trees think, plants speak, rivers communicate, chimpanzees have different cultures, crocodiles weep, birds dream, dogs write and wolves go to war and make peace. We can see what they see, feel what they feel, think what they think, hear what they say – in short: be what they are - if only we listen carefully and stop treating them like things, timber, cattle, meat or “standing reserve” (*Bestand*) at our disposition. Provided we properly attune to their ways of life, we will discover that not only elephants, whales and dolphins, but potentially all beasts are “dependent rational animals” (MacIntyre, 1999) like us. We can contemplate animals as species (e.g. the dogs, the chimps and the bonobos), as populations (e.g. the street dogs in Delhi, the chimpanzees at Arnhem Zoo) or as singular animal persons (e.g. Rusty, Fido or Cheetah). When we, humans, approach other species, other animals, other lifeforms as natural variations of ourselves, the continuity between us and them will come into the open. The dualisms that separate nature/culture, human/animal, wild/domesticated, zoē */bios* will slowly break down as we realise that we ourselves are animals, water and compost. If we approach the animals, the plants and the stars without fear of anthropomorphism, they may finally appear as what they are – living creatures that have a history, a culture and a society. Like us, interconnected with us, but nevertheless profoundly different from us, they lead a life. Like us, they all have their lifeworld, their *Umwelt*, their milieu that is specific to them, which they inhabit, constitute, make and are made by, which they adapt or adapt to, according to their needs, necessities and tendencies.

The new vision that animates life introduces a Gestalt switch that goes well beyond the famous “duck-rabbit diagram”, which Wittgenstein (1958: 193-229) discusses at great length in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Now I see a duck, then I see a rabbit, and then, suddenly, something queer happens that affects me, moves me, and transforms me. Unexpectedly, I am no longer seeing two different aspects of the same thing, which I first see “as a duck” and then “as a rabbit”. While I am still seeing a duck and a rabbit, it suddenly dawns upon me that the duck and the rabbit might also be looking at me, watching me “as a humanimal”, seeing me watching them as “animals”. The Gestalt shift that occurs when different life forms, each with their own forms of life, their own languages and their own games, start to really pay attention to each other is akin to a conversion. We can all recall from experience the “wonder” we felt as kids when we visited the primate section in the national zoo. I am also reminded of “Bobby”, the stray dog in the concentration camp that Levinas (1976: 216) describes as “the last Kantian in Nazi Germany”, because he treated everybody evenly and with respect.

New ecologists, ethologists and anthropologists often refer to the elementary molecular “becomings” (“Becoming-intensive, becoming-animal, becoming-intensive”) on the “animal plateau” in Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980: 284-380) operatic masterwork to evoke the new kind of intensive, affective, mimetic relations between different species. Animals become human and humans become animal when they enter into symbiotic relations with each other without hierarchy. Symbiotic connections between humans and animals are not ones of filiation and descent, but of affiliation and companionship, affinity and sympathy. Here is an important passage from *A Thousand Plateaus* about symbiotic alliances: “Becoming is always of a different order than filiation. It is an alliance. There are true becomings in the vast domain of *symbioses* with no possible filiation. There is a block of becoming that seizes the wasp and the orchid, but from which no wasp-orchid can ever descend. There is a block of becoming that takes hold of the cat and the baboon, with a C virus that puts the alliance in operation” (Guattari and Deleuze, 1980: 291-292). By living together on the same territory and sharing the same habitat, wasps and orchids, crocodiles and trunks, bats and humans are involved in neighbourly relations of proximity and vicinity without strict walls that separate one species from the other. They live and die together in a heterogeneous “block of becoming” or actant-rhizome network without beginning or end.

The new philosophy of life is post-Darwinian. It deconstructs the linearity of evolution and consciously reverses “human supremacy”. In the new perspective, which takes its cues from Spinoza and Bergson, humans are no longer at the apex of evolution. They are no longer on top of nature. Rather they are in the midst of it. Symbiotic relations between species are without hierarchies, which does not mean that they are equal and symmetrical. They can be generous and fair, but also exploitative. If one looks at them from the perspective of a Maussian theory of the gift, one can arrange the exchanges along a “continuum from mutualism (all partners benefit from the symbiosis), through commensalism (one partner benefits without harming the other) to parasitism (one benefits, the other is harmed” (Adloff, 2023). The new vitalism reshuffles the relations between nature and society and demands a conversion of the worldview (Kalaora, 2022): The animals, the plants and the fungi are no longer part of the human environment. By plunging the humans back into the humus that sustains them, the humans and their activities now appear as part of the natural environment of the animals and the plants that also inhabit the Earth.

Humans and non-humans are entangled within ecosystems. They are not disconnected, but live together on a territory they share. Not so long ago, the animals were considered “good to think with” (Lévi-Strauss). They are now “good to live with” (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010: 552). Besides the human, there are ten million other species that inhabit our planet. It is not because we do not pay attention to them - or they to us - that we should ignore them. All life is sacred. Though not all living creatures have attained the status of *bios* (qualified life) that deserves our protection, the times when living creatures were considered zoē, mere life, that can be killed without punishment (Agamben, 1998), if not without guilt, are probably over. Biopolitics in the enlarged sense means that from now onwards all zoē is *bios.* By the mere fact of being alive, pangolins, jaguars, coral reefs and mushroom persons are part of our polity and join our “commons”. They need to be protected not just by us, but also from us, for their own sake and also for ours. From this bio-political perspective on the “politics of nature”, all living beings have to be “gathered” in a “parliament of things” (Latour, 1994). In the parliament, things, persons and quasi-persons are represented by their spokespersons. They speak in the name of rivers and birds, spirits and humans; if they speak in their name, it is because they listen attentively to what they say when they communicate with us. Thus, for instance, in the experimental setup of the parliament of the Loire in France, the river has been able to voice its complaints (pollution, floods, encroachments) and defend its interests before a heterogeneous collective formed by engineers, scientists, urbanists, citizens, lawyers, activists and artists (Le Floc‘h, de Toledo, C. and Pignot, (2021). The parliament of the Loire functioned a bit like a tribunal. It acknowledged the “personhood” of the river and granted it legal rights. Following the Whanganui in New Zealand, the Ganges and the Yamuna in India, the Loire became thereby the first river in Europe to be democratically represented.

*The Anthropology of Life*

The ecological crisis is not a crisis of the environment. It is a crisis of society (Beck,1988). Modern risks are manufactured; the catastrophe is self-inflicted; the destruction of nature by human industry is suicidal. The morbid symptoms are a product of the modern way of life and the social, economic and political structures that support it. As long as we maintain our reliance on fossil fuels, practice long-distance transport, support agrobusiness, sustain our addiction to mass consumption and do not break with the industrial-capitalist “dogma of growth”, the machines will keep on turning against us – and, now that they are becoming more intelligent by the day, possibly without us. The ecological crisis forces us to revise some of our inherited worldviews and to attack the key foundations of modernist epistemology. The deconstruction of the opposition between nature and culture or nature and society is not just a post-structuralist pastime. In the Anthropocene, it may well be a question of life and death. And that’s why new ways of thinking the relation between human and non-human societies is so urgent. “Going beyond the dualism opens up an entirely different intellectual landscape, one in which states and substances are replaced by processes and relations”, Descola and Pálsson (1996: 12) say in their comprehensive overview of good reasons to overhaul the dichotomy. Indeed, the binary has become an “epistemological obstacle” to the advance of science, conscience and consciousness. It is typically Western, not universal and does not accommodate alternative epistemologies. It does not even adequately describe the actual practices of Western science and technology. Research has shown that animals also have culture that plants have consciousness and that humans are animals. It maintains the disciplinary boundaries between natural and social sciences. But above all, it hinders true ecological understanding.

In environmental anthropology, post-humanism is an attempt, an invitation and an injunction to rethink our “world relations” beyond the strictures of Enlightenment humanism. What is emerging is a new relational and processual ontology of cosmic proportions in which every thing, every body and every soul are connected in a web of life. Thanks to Bruno Latour´s (1991) anthropology of modernity, we fathom that our all-too-human partition of the world with Nature on one side, ~~God~~ crossed out in the middle, and Culture, Society and Technology on the other side, leaves us alone in a universe that is devoid of meaning. By “muting” nature, we have emptied it of meaning, leaving behind a human subject, facing an absurd world, surrounded by a hostile nature it has to dominate. “From this point of view, Sartre and Camus, the great thinkers of emancipation, are objective allies of extractivism and the ecological crisis” (Morizot, 2020: 38). Existentialism is indeed a humanism, to quote Sartre’s well-known response to Heidegger’s letter on humanism. Not every humanism is existentialist, though. If anything, humanism is a hermeneutic, intersubjective and dialogical enterprise. It is the philosophy of a human being that is open to alterity and communicates with the other through language, affect and other non-linguistic means. If the human being is never alone in this sense, the fact remains that by splitting off nature from culture, we still have a society, made up of humans among themselves, on one side (*Geselligkeit*), and nature, composed of non-humans, on the other.

The question now is if we can expand this conviviality, this typical humanist enjoyment of being with others, engaging in conversation, sharing experiences, into a transhuman convivialism that fosters community between different species. The philanthropic strand within modern humanism (Humanism III), which foregrounds moral sentiments of care, sympathy and generosity, allows for, and, in my opinion, even demands, the inclusion of non-humans in an enlarged community of fate. Hannah Arendt’s idea of “enlarged thinking”, which “knows how to transcend its own limitations” (Arendt, 1961: 220) and “discloses to us the nature of the world insofar as it is a common world” (id., 221), has to be enlarged once more to encompass the whole range of intersubjective, intercultural and interspecies conversations.

If the non-human is not to remain an unmarked category - “like non-white, it implies a lack of something” (Leigh Star, *apud* Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010: 555) - one still needs to requalify the non-human. The “anthropology of life” and “interspecies ethnographies” (Ogden, Hall and Tanita, 2013) adopt a relational mode of thinking that exemplifies how this lack could be filled in with a new post-humanist cosmovision that overcomes the Cartesian and Kantian splits between minds and bodies, ends and means. By reconnecting humans and non-humans in a common world, without relapsing into primitive anti-humanism, the grand partition between nature and culture, physis and nomos, instrumentality and morality, could perhaps be transcended. When the world-relations are thought differently, different relations in the world come into vision and, perhaps, even into being. In his Adorno lectures at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Didier Fassin (2018: 27-32) distinguishes three overlapping, but distinct strands in the anthropology of life: a phenomenological, an ontological and a cultural one. While they all steer away from anthropocentrism, the cultural approach of environmental hermeneutics will eventually bring us back to the humanities.

To illustrate how different world-relations are envisioned by each of the different strands, let us follow a few anthropologists in the field. Our first anthropologist is Tim Ingold, a British anthropologist with a phenomenological bent; our first field is a cornfield somewhere in Flanders in August in 1565. In the traces of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Ingold is particularly interested in the phenomenology of perception and in how people “dwell” in the living world. In a moving investigation of the ecology of landscapes, he immerses the sensing body back into the world and analyses how the landscape comes into being as human beings go along with their everyday activities. The landscape is not just “out there” to be observed. The whole universe is implicated in a processual, dynamic, evolving process in which both the subjects and the world are intertwined and come simultaneously into being. In a masterful interpretation of a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder that depicts a rural summer landscape in which peasants are harvesting corn, he makes the landscape come to life. The scene is buzzing with sounds, movements and activities that are part of everyday life. The valley flows into the surrounding hills, the paths bear the imprint of the countless journeys people and animals have made, fruit is ripening on the tree, some people are eating and others are sleeping while the reapers are rhythmically working in unison. The rhythmic patterns of human activity “resonate”, as Ingold says repeatedly, with the rhythms of other living beings and the world as a whole. He ask us to “imagine a film of the landscape, shot over years, centuries, even millennia.  Slightly speeded up, plants appear to engage in very animal-like movements, trees flex their limbs without any prompting from the winds. Speeded up rather more, glaciers flow like rivers and even the earth begins to move. At yet greater speeds solid rock bends, buckles and flows like molten metal. The world itself begins to breathe. At each of these levels, coherence is founded upon resonance” (Ingold, 2000: 201).

With ethologists and anthropologists, we can change the perspective and move from a phenomenological world in which humans and non-humans engage as sentient beings in the tasks of carrying their own life - “humans are humaning, baboons are babooning, reindeer reindeering” , as Ingold (2013: 21) says - to a world beyond the human in which animals and plants think, write and communicate with each other through signs. Baptiste Morizot is not an anthropologist, but a philosopher and ethologist who has become an intellectual star in France. He tracks, observes and interprets packs of wolves (Morizot, 2020: 41-152). Wolves howl. One of the primary reasons why wolves howl is to communicate with other members of the pack. Howling allows wolves to locate each other over long distances, coordinate their movements, and reinforce social bonds within the pack. Wolves also howl to defend their territory and warn off rival packs. The chants are not only directed to other wolves, but also to other species in their environment – the row dear they prey upon, the crows who feast on the corpses, the dogs with whom they have relations of rivalry. Morizot knows how to imitate their howling. He knows that they are listening and that they hear him. Sometimes they respond, sometimes they don´t. He also knows how to read the tracks they leave in the snow. That is how he knows that wolves have come to his encounter in silent response to his howling (id., 80 and 138). The wolves have avoided contact, while spying upon him, before dashing off to join the other wolves of the pack who are howling.

Our third field is the Amazon rain forest and its indigenous populations. In a book-length interview with Pierre Charbonnier, Philippe Descola, who has done fieldwork with the Achuar Jivaro in Ecuador and is now professor at the Collège de France, recounts how it dawned on him that his natives were “animists” who engaged in particular relations with plants and animals in their forests, rivers and gardens. When they wake up in the morning, first thing they do is to share their dreams with the members of their family, which may count up to thirty members. They report how during the night they have been visited by spirits. Thus, a man recounts how in his dream he encountered a bleeding man who complained that he had been shot at - it was a young deer who had been killed in contravention of the prohibition to hunt cervids; a woman tells the story of a young woman who complained that they had tried to poison her - it was a manioc shrub that had been planted next to a venomous plant used for fishing. As he listened to the dreams, he came to realise that the Achuar think that “animals and plants see themselves as humans, and as they see them as such when their soul travels, the dreamer also encounters them under the aspect of their humanity, and this is what allows humans to communicate with non-humans” (Descola, 2014: 149-150). Animals and plants are therefore as it were humans in disguise. Underneath of the feathers and the leaves that cover their bodies, they are people like us, living in society of their own, entering into relations with humans according to strict rules of behaviour. Game animals are treated “as in-laws” by men, while plants that are cultivated in gardens are treated “like children” by women.

In “How Dogs Dream”, Eduardo Kohn, who has done fieldwork in the same basin of the Amazon with the Runa, tells us that dogs, even if they are human, cannot, under normal circumstances, understand the full range of human speech. “If people want dogs to understand them, they must give dogs hallucinogenic drugs. That is, the Runa must make their dogs into shamans so that they can traverse the ontological boundaries […] Humans also ingest hallucinogens, especially ayahuasca, so that they can converse normally with these spirits” (Kohn, 2007:13). Ayahuasca is typically consumed under the guidance of a shaman in a ritual setting. In Amerindian cultures, shamans act as masters of ceremony and have the ability to enter into contact with spirits, cross ontological boundaries and establish communication between humans and animals. They are in-between and can “see non-human beings as they see themselves (i.e. as humans)” (Viveiros de Castro, 2015: 49 and 171). Shamans can divest themselves of their human physical appearance as humans so as to be recognised by the animals as one of them. In dreams and in shamanism, people can thus become animals and animals can become people. The metamorphosis is manifold, almost Deleuzian. Dogs can not only become people, people can also become jaguars and enter into their perspective.

On the opening page of *How Forests Think*, his much celebrated book on the anthropology of life, Kohn tells us that the people in Ávila warn him that he should sleep face up, because if a jaguar sees him looking at him, he will leave him alone, whereas if he turns the face away, he will see him as prey, as dead meat, and attack him. The anecdote, he says, “forces us to recognize that how jaguars see us matters to us, and if this is so, then anthropology cannot limit to asking how people see the world” (Kohn, 2013: 92). He concludes that we, humans, are not the only ones who think. Dogs, jaguars and even forests think, as the title of his captive book suggests. We may be the only ones who use symbols, but where’s there’s life, there’s thinking, and where there’s thinking, there are signs - “indices” and “icons” in Peirce’s semiotics - that carry meaning beyond the human. Semiosis and interpretative processes are fundamentals of life in general. For biosemiotics, a new discipline that arises at the intersection of theoretical biology and informatics, sign and meaning processes are part of life (Hoffmeyer, 2008). Cultural semiosis must therefore be regarded as only a special instance of a more general biosemiosis that continuously enfolds and acts in the biosphere. Humans are exceptional in that they use symbolic representations and have explicit worldviews. Sensification and signification occur throughout all realms of life. In the world at large, all living beings establish their own “world-relations” and have their own “worldviewings”. For animists, the world is full of entities (human and non-human animals, presumably also human and non-human plants and things) that are persons, have souls, communicate with each other and form communities. All, without exception, have their worldviewings. Some of these worldviewings and world-relations are human. They are mediated by symbolic forms and can therefore qualify as *Weltanschauungen*. From a biocentric perspective that conceives of the human as one species among many others, worldviews are only a subclass of world-visionings through signs and meanings that occur at all levels of the kingdom of life - from the molecular to the cellular to the organismal and the ecological levels of life.

*Anthropologists in the Anthropocene*

Anthropologists, philosophers, sociologists and ethologists are “reenchanting” the world and transforming it once again into a “magical garden” (Weber, 2001: 442). By focusing on life beyond the human, they rehabilitate animism (in the Americas), totemism (in Australia), fetishism (in Africa) and analogism (in Europe). They are rescuing these worldviews from the old-evolutionary conception that had reigned over their disciplines since their inception. They are removing the “imperial debris” that obstructed their vision not only of other forms of life beyond Europe, but also of other lifeforms beyond the human. By foregrounding a relational mode of being-in-the world that cuts across the kingdoms of life, they recognise the entanglements between humans and non-humans and re-establish communication among and between species. By doing so, they successfully overcome the predicament of Lévi-Strauss who, rather tragically, condemned humanity to sharing the bounty of the Earth with other species, yet without being able to communicate with them: “Notwithstanding the clouds of ink spilled by the Judeo-Christian tradition, no situation appears more tragical, more offensive to the heart and spirit than that of a humanity that coexists with other living species who share the enjoyment of the Earth and with whom it cannot communicate” (Lévi-Strauss, *apud* Morizot, 2020: 39).

The explorations of the entanglements of life have to be understood against the background of the Anthropocene and its entanglements with death, destruction and extinction. If anthropology has changed, it is because the world has changed as well. The bucolic landscape that Tim Ingold has beautifully brought into movement is moving once again, though not in the direction anticipated. As the world accelerates towards its own - and our - destruction, the pattern of activities have become dissonant at all levels. Nature, which was considered a stable background, has awoken as if it were animated by the devil. In a memorable passage of *Facing Gaia*, Latour (2015: 65) compares the becoming alive of nature to an animated movie: “As in a Disney version of *Sleeping Beauty*, all the servants in the palace, until then passive and inert, awoke from their sleep, yawning, and began to move about like the devil– the dwarves and also the clock, the trees in the garden and also the knobs on the doors”. The re-animation of the Earth is most ominous and portentous. Gaia, the Goddess of fertility, growth and abundance takes revenge on those who harm her children. Owing to the Great Acceleration of human activities and impacts on nature since 1945, represented by 12 iconic graphs that look like “hockey sticks” (Steffen et al. 2015), the Earth has become an active, fragile, trembling, unpredictable being - a “mega-actant” and a “hyper-object” that moves, that is moved, angry and at war with the humans.

If the anthropologists have gently imploded the distinction between humans and non-humans, naturalists and animists, traditional and modern cosmologies, it is because the communities where they are doing their fieldwork are awash with violence and destruction. They are facing the brunt of environmental destruction as extractivist industries and agribusinesses take hold of their land by legal or illegal means. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2014: 140-143) remind us in their essay on the apocalyptic imaginary of our time that, for indigenous populations in the Americas, the end of the world already happened 500 years ago, when Europeans “discovered” their lands and decimated their people by spreading smallpox, measles and influenza throughout the continent. Like contemporary “collapsologists in France and “preppers” in the US, anthropologists who study the Anthropos in the age of the Anthropocene are haunted by the metaphysics of the end of the world. Experimenting with new styles and methods, through words and images that enact connectivity and enliven moral imagination, they try to reweave the worlds that are falling apart. Their vitalism is the counterpoint to a dying planet; their animism is a swansong of submerging continents; their sensibility a response to brutality. Anthropologist have become “entropologists” (Lévi-Strauss, 1954: 496) who study the irreversible disintegration of the natural and social order. They investigate all kinds of disasters (wildfires, toxic contaminations, water degradations, oil spills, nuclear meltdowns, epidemics), cruelty on an industrial scale (animal farms, animal testing, slaughterhouses), ecological crimes (illegal logging, land grabbing, mining, forced expulsions of Indigenous populations, pollution of air, soil and water) and anthropogenic extinctions of whole species (like the Tasmanian tiger, the baiji dolphin, the paradise bird) that befall upon their natives and their kin. Instead of gazing into the Anthropocene like “disaster tourists”, Deborah Bird Rose (2013), for example, who pioneered in the field of “ecological humanities” and “extinction studies”, wrote slowly and beautifully from within the Anthropocene about animism among the Aboriginals in Australia and interspecies communication in blasted landscapes. Through passionate immersion and active engagement with the cascading entropy that transforms life into death, she thinks through ecocides and encounters a more-than-human world at the edge of extinction. The encounter with the ultimate survivors of an endangered species is an infinite opening towards another that is no longer here. With generative care, her work on storytelling pays attention to the connectivities and responsibilities of interspecies kinship. The task of “existential ecology” is a moral one: “To resituate the human in ecological terms and to resituate the non-human in ethical terms” (quoted in Van Dooren and Chrulew, 2022: 12).

In a similar spirit, writing this time from within the ruins of capitalism, Anna Tsing (2015) follows the story of the matsutake, a pungent mushroom that is an edible delicacy in Japan, across three continents. The fungus grows by preference on pine trees and thrives in “human-disturbed” forests. In an experimental multi-sited, multi-sensorial and multi-species ethnography, the *Mushroom at the End of the World* investigates the symbiosis of humans and non-humans in “heterogeneous assemblages” of mushrooms, forests and people. It reconstructs the commodity chains that link a motley crew of foragers (refugees from Laos and Cambodia, American veterans and itinerant poor people) who search for mushrooms, the traders who buy and sell them, and the Japanese consumers who buy them at astronomic prices to give them away as relational presents. In the same vein, recent ethnographic research on the “patchy Anthropocene” (Tsing, Mathews and Bubandt, 2019) exhibits the deadly symbioses and mutual accommodations between species in extreme situations of exploitation, degradation and oppression. Ugandan garbage pickers who work alongside Marabout storks on the municipal landfill in Kampala, pesticides that seep across boundaries of land, water and skin on the banana plantations in Martinique, feral proliferations on monocrop cultures of coffee in East Africa, and Sars-Covid viruses that spread through zoonosis between avian birds, bats (?) and humans offer vivid descriptions of real dystopias.[[4]](#endnote-4) The stories of anthropology are dark. They eschew a happy end, but are not without hope altogether. They intentionally “stay with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016), not to make it worse, but because doing nothing is not an option either. The ethnographies of strange forms of life that emerge in the borderlands of industrial capitalism make visible a variety of milieux in interaction. By doing so they nurture the existence of “counter-Anthropocenes” (Chateauraynaud and Debaz, 2017) - places of resilience and resistance where hope and despair grow towards the sky.

*Ontology or Phenomenology?*

Quentin Meillassoux, one of the leading figures of “speculative realism” asks us to imagine what the worldwas like before the advent of the *homo habilis* in the steppes of Africa some two million years ago. He calls the reality anterior to the emergence of the human species, or even anterior to the appearance of life on Earth some 3.5 billions year ago, “ancestral reality” (Meillassoux, 2008: 10). The return to the ancestral, the world *an sich* as it exists independently of any human being, challenges directly the dogma of “correlationism” that has accompanied philosophy since Kant’s Copernican revolution in the *First Critique*, according to which we cannot access objective reality without the apport of subjective categories. By breaking open the correlation between the subject and the object, the world *an sich* and the world *für uns*, realists want to break free from the restrictions on metaphysical speculation that Kant had imposed on philosophy and roam freely through the “great outdoors” (ib.: 7) that are anterior to every form of human relation to the world.

Of late, prominent post-structuralist anthropologists, associated with American cultural anthropology (Roy Wagner), British social anthropology (Marilyn Strathern) and French social anthropology (Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola) have also taken an “ontological turn” (Charbonnier, Salmon and Skafish, 2017, Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017). If they could revert time, they would gladly return to a pristine, originary world that precedes not the advent of the Anthropos on Earth, but the arrival of European colonialism on indigenous lands. The turn implies a turning of the perspective. Instead of asking how humans (the natives, the colonisers and the anthropologist who study both) see the world from within a certain perspective, the anthropologists at the cutting edge of the three main traditions of their discipline look at what appears in the different perspectives: entities (humans, animals, plants, things, spirits) and the relations between them (which can be instrumental, strategic, utilitarian, communicative, expressive, conjunctive, participative, mimetic). They argue that the various cosmologies are not merely worldviews – views on the selfsame world as it disclosed from different standpoints in the world. Rather, they refer to different worlds altogether with their own metaphysics, ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies that are different from ours. Looking at the world differently discloses different realities, natures, essences, substances, properties and states of affairs. The basic furniture of the world, the stuff it is made of, the entities that compose it and the relations between them are supposedly ontologically different. Instead of assuming that we can take the Western worldview as the standard and measure of the world, reason, logic, meaning, order\*, etc. (Garfinkel, 1988) that defines what exists and what does not, what is possible and what is not, what is valuable and what is not, we should consider it as one particular way of worldmaking among others. When one no longer takes the standard view of nature and society as given, other worlds, other natures, other societies, other cultures, other histories come into view.

With a remarkable sense of symmetry, Viveiros de Castro (2015: 55-69) has proposed to invert the usual epistemic scheme of modernism. Instead of assuming that all people share the same nature, as defined by science, while accepting different visions or versions of it (“multiculturalism”), he advanced “multinaturalism” as an indigenous alternative. For animists like the Araweté in the Brazilian Amazon, all animals are humans, have a soul and share therefore a same culture; what changes is their differential embodiment, which determines the perspective in which things will appear to them. This is evidenced in a story about a native who had lost his way in the forest (id., 89). When he arrived at an unknown village, he asked for a bowl of “manioc beer”. When the villagers handed him a bowl with human blood, he was horrified. They insisted, however, that he got what he had asked for, from which he concluded that his hosts were not human and that he had arrived in a village of jaguars.

Given that the visions and divisions, partitions and connections of and in the world are not the same when one splits and lumps entities in a different way, we cannot impose our categories on other cultures. Nature, culture, society, technology, but also religion, science, economy, politics, arts - not to mention progress, development, growth and profit - are as recent as the realities they refer to. That explains why anthropologists resist the suggestion that “ontology is just another word for culture” (Venkatesan, 2010). Ontology here does neither refer to what is “really real” nor to “being qua being”. What they understand by ontology is, in fact, phenomenology. It corresponds to the world as it appears spontaneously in the natural attitude. This is what is commonly referred to as the lifeworld or *Lebenswelt*. Technically speaking, using the language of the Husserl of *Experience and Judgment*, ontology is the world as it is constituted “pre-predicatively”, as it is pre-given and pre-understood in immediate experience, before any possible judgment. This world that is always already there is taken for granted. It forms a stable background of beliefs that is not questioned. It is so evidently given that it is hardly questionable. This world of certainties forms the absolute ground of life. According to Husserl, (1964: 25), it is presupposed by any practice and precedes judgment, knowledge and science: “It is this universal ground of belief in the world that every praxis presupposes. This holds for the praxis of life, as well as for the theoretical praxis of knowledge. The being of the world in its totality is the self-evidence that is never questioned and is not first acquired by the activity of judgment. Rather it constitutes presupposition of all judgment”.

Although I appreciate the intention behind the ontological turn and I am swayed by the anthropology of life and interspecies ethnographies, I will not take the ontological turn. I am a critical realist, a phenomenologist, a hermeneutician and a humanist. As a critical realist, I am suspicious about the ontological claims the anthropologists are making (Vandenberghe, 2022). At the end of the day, their ontology is really a hermeneutics of cosmovisions and a phenomenology of lifeworlds. Their metaphysics are descriptive and comparative. If they multiply the ontologies, it is to relativise and provincialise the Western worldview. It is only one cosmology among others. If they tend to absolutise the difference between us and them, it is for i) epistemological, ii) methodological and iii) political reasons, not for ontological ones. Epistemologically, they want to underscore that the scientific standpoint is not the only one. There are other, subaltern knowledges and other ways of disclosing the world. The “view from nowhere” that Western science privileges is not universal, but local and situated, and so is their knowledge. Other epistemologies exist beyond the sciences. They express other ways of being in the world and alternative ways of knowing it. Methodologically, the ontological turn is a move within anthropology that seeks to underscore difference and enhance alterity. As such it is not an ontology, but as Holbraad and Pedersen (2017: ix) attest, a “technology of ethnographic description”. Finally, the ontological turn is part of a post-colonial critique of knowledge production that wants to restore epistemic justice - in atonement for “epistemicides” (Sousa Santos, 2014) Westerners have committed. The turn gives precedence to subaltern knowledges and indigenous populations. Now that the Earth system is collapsing as one tipping point after the other is being reached, it is their turn - “the turn of the native” (Viveiros de Castro, 2015: 88) - to tell us how we should organise our world-relations and sustain the web of life.

As a phenomenologist, I will take any call to “return to the things themselves” as a call for a return to the thicket of originary experience. The world will therefore always be interpreted as lifeworld and understood as a primordial world in which things appear as phenomena and never as *Dinge an sich*. For me, nature will always be “nature” as experienced, described, interpreted, explained or otherwise constituted by humans (or, by extension, by any other living beings endowed with intentionality that have their own habitat, environment and lifeworld). Nature is thus always that part of reality that has entered into the purview of humans (including the ones who are observing the non-humans). I do not deny the existence of nature as such (ancestral nature, wilderness) and support conservation projects, like the UN Convention on Biological Diversity that was recently signed. In this text, however, I will only consider nature in so far as it is considered by humans. What has not entered the human world will remain extra-human. Similarly for society, culture and technology. I will assume that the parts of nature that are integrated into society - via culture or technology - lose their original character and become part of the social process, endowed with significance and meaning. By implication, the Anthropocene will only be considered here in its social, cultural, historical and political dimension. As a social scientist, I will thus not venture into the natural sciences. I assume that the scientists give us an objective account of the natural world and I willingly accept their results. I therefore trust that no one will think I have any sympathy for climate-sceptics or anti-vaxxers.

As a humanist, I will stay within the Kantian fold and assume that any statement about the world also says something about the ones who enunciate it and about their worldviews and world-relations. However one wants to turn it, for us, humans, “correlationism” is our fate. As we are always already inserted in webs of meaning that turn the world into a human world, we cannot consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity, words and things, the transitive and the intransitive independently of one another. Knowledge is dual and always has “two sides”, as Roy Bhaskar (1978: 21-24) rightfully stressed: a transitive and an intransitive one. The first side refers to a conceptual apparatus without which knowledge is impossible for us, humans, and the second to a referent that exists outside of, and independently from, the knowledge we may have of it. It now happens that in the social world, the transitive is constitutive of the intransitive: the object is schematised, categorised and conceptualised by the actors themselves who produce society (ontology of practice). The distinction between the transitive and the intransitive collapses, though it may “re-enter” at a lower level of distinction in the form of “analytic dualism”, for instance. In the social sciences, one therefore has to reject both the “epistemic fallacy”, the idea that ontology can be reduced to epistemology, and its correlate, “the ontological fallacy”, which assumes that one can make ontological statements about the world without reference to how we can have knowledge of the world. This symmetrisation does neither imply the rejection of the basic tenets of critical realism nor the wholesale acceptance of constructivism. It is meant to clear the way to a cultural ecology of worldviews. The only affirmations I want to make at this point are: i) that statements about nature are always also statements about culture and ii) that everything that is social, cultural and historical can be analysed by the human sciences.

Knowledge of nature is always incomplete and mediated by culture. Science is not the only way in which nature can be known. Nature can be known and experienced in different ways. Its properties and qualities can be seen, felt or otherwise appreciated (walks in the countryside, art and meditation) without passing through the rigors of scientific objectification. Even natural scientists who spend their days observing the workings of nature in their laboratory don’t have direct access to nature. For them, their lab is their lifeworld. Whereas human scientists may have difficulty understanding the workings of the natural world, they can with some effort understand the life-worlds, world-relations and world-visions of the natural scientists. Let’s take as an example scientists who do research on animal behaviour. For the humanists who study them, the animals will be part of the lifeworld. They will be observed as they appear in the everyday life of the scientists, in their observations and in their scientific publications. And given that the everyday life of the scientists is shot through with theories, concepts and presuppositions that come straight from their disciplines, these will also appear in their field of observation. The ticks of the ecologist (Jakob von Uexküll), the pawns of the ethologist (Adolf Portmann), the frogs of the biologist (Humberto Maturana), the chimpanzees of the primatologist (Jane Goodall, Frans De Waal, Shirley Strum) and the forests of the anthropologist (Eduardo Kohn) are human, not because we have made them, but because the scientists who write about these creatures approach them from within a scientific worldview that bears the marks of its time and its location. Even the anthropologists who would rather conceive of their discipline as a contribution to “the public understanding of humankind in all its aspects” (statement of the American Anthropological Association, 2010) than as a science are writing for their peers and have to accept the rules of the game (invocation of classic authors, reference to scientific literature, ethnographic fieldwork). If anything, for a hermeneutician working in the tradition of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, it may even be easier to understand contemporary anthropology reflexively as an expression of a certain type of humanity in times of ecological upheaval.

*The Romantic Spirit*

Wilhelm Dilthey, the German philosopher and historian, best known for his work on hermeneutics, is one of the founders of the human sciences. Following his *Weltanschauungslehre*, his theory of worldviews (Dilthey, 1931), which he describes as a “philosophy of philosophy”, I will investigate the ontological turn as an anthropology of anthropology, i.e. as a reflection on the Anthropos and its world-relations that expresses a definite worldview at the time of serious ecological stress. In the wake of the collapse of metaphysical systems, Dilthey no longer considered the absolute truth claims of philosophy. As one of the main exponents of historicism, he accepted their relativity as a historical fact: “World history as world tribunal has shown that every metaphysical system is relative, transient, ephemeral” (Dilthey, 1931: 12). Putting all systems on a par, for comparative purposes, he considered metaphysics as cultural expressions of a conscious life that is aware of its world-relations and seeks to grasp the totality of being in a comprehensive system of thought. While the various metaphysical systems (empiricism, rationalism, idealism, romanticism, etc.) are incompatible and in conflict with each other, when one understands them as “documents” in which various worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*) and world-relations (*Weltbeziehungen*) come to expression, one can study the form, function and development of the human mind through the ages and across societies. When one takes the variety of philosophical systems as object of historical and cultural analysis, one can discover, distinguish and describe various worldviews, set up a typology of world-relations and analyse their regularities.

In his overview of world philosophies, Dilthey (1931: 73-118) discerns three basic forms of philosophical systems: naturalism, subjective idealism, and “objective idealism or pantheism”. These forms are recurrent. One finds them not only in Europe, not only in Germany, but also throughout history (in classical Greece, the Arab world, India and China). Going deeper, beneath the various systems of thought, even beneath the transcendental conditions that make thinking possible, the historian of ideas encounters life in its fullness - the experience (*Erlebnis*) of life of real persons. In the place of Kant’s rational subject, in whose veins “no real blood flows”, he places the human as a living, sensing, experiencing, creative being. With aplomb, he affirms: “The last root of *Weltanschauung* is life” (id., 78). And he adds: “Knowledge cannot go back behind life” (id., 184) […] That’s how one sees that the conflicts between metaphysical systems are ultimately grounded in life itself, in life experiences, in the positions to the problem of life” (id. 98). Indeed, the variety of philosophical systems express, articulate and make explicit a whole gamut of life experiences, both at the individual and collective levels of existence. These life experiences are not only objectivated in philosophical systems. They also come to expression in religion, the arts and the sciences. In all cultural spheres of life, behind the various worldviews, he senses the existence of concrete human beings, partaking of a particular time and a particular society, who are trying to figure out their relations to the world. Because an inner life manifests itself in the worldviews that traverse and illuminate all cultural formations of a given epoch or society, the latter can be understood from within as the expression of a particular type of humanity.

Every epoch has its central concept that permeates all aspects of its culture: religion, philosophy, the arts, the sciences, politics and everyday life. Influenced by the philosophy of Goethe, Nietzsche and Bergson, Georg Simmel (1999) suggested shortly before his death that, following God (Middle Ages) and Reason (the Enlightenment), Life had now become the central concept of the epoch. He enthusiastically welcomed this cultural shift away from Enlightenment rationalism towards a more dynamic, resonant and spiritual worldview. It remains anthropocentric, but opens up to nature as it pursues to reconnect the spirit to life. In *Lebensanschaaung*, his philosophical testament, he went on to develop the contours of the philosophy of life as a i) relational, ii) processual and iii) vitalist worldview. In the sciences of his time, notably in Einstein’s theory of relativity, he observed a tendency to dissolve the substances in functions and the entities into relations. Whatever exists is sustained by a web of relations that interconnects the entities into a system. The value of an entity is relative. It is determined by the totality of relations that sustain it. The structuralist tendency towards relationism, which suspends the whole world in a system of internal references, was next put in motion in an evolutionary view of the universe that is radically processual. Being is endless becoming. Over and against both mechanism (adaptation) and finalism (teleology), it posits a vital impulse (Bergson´s *élan vital*) that drives the evolution of species and the creation of new forms of life and consciousness towards further differentiation. New forms emerge out of life and delimit it, fixing the flow for a moment before they start flowing again as they are engulfed by life. This dialectic between life and forms is continuous, open to novelty, difference and multiplicity. The dynamic vision of life as continuous becoming without end is not only relational and processual, it is also vitalist, animist and pantheist. Nature is not dead and inert; it is alive and ablaze with spirits. Full of energies and pulsations, matter vibrates. Stones are endowed with life, plants are ensouled and animals partake in the spirit. Life outside can be known, felt and experienced from within. It is both object and subject of knowledge. On the spiral of life, Nature and Spirit are ultimately one. Life becomes progressively conscious of itself in and of nature, first in plants, then in animals and, finally, in human beings who grasp that they are part of a living, breathing, thinking whole. When the whole outside resonates within the soul, all points of the universe are connected in a pantheistic or panentheistic worldview.

If I have chosen Georg Simmel’s philosophy of life - rather than any one of the classic poets from Weimar (Schiller and Goethe) or idealist philosophers from Jena (Fichte, Schelling and Hegel) - it is not only because I am more familiar with his philosophy of culture than with *Naturphilosophi*e (Vandenberghe, 2010), but also because it exemplifies Dilthey’s idea of *Weltanschauung* almost in pure form. As a vision of life that traverses religion, philosophy and the arts, with each of the spheres reverberating in the others, it brings to expression an experience (*Erlebnis*) of the whole that “resonates” in all the senses of the term (Rosa, 2016: 281-298): The whole universe is enchanted, animated, and filled with life (pulses, rhythms, flows); the person who contemplates the universe is “a←ffected”, touched and moved in its soul by this living whole; the soul reaches out, “e→motes”, and responds to the call of the universe in attunement; and we, the readers, are also touched and moved by the evocation of a world that is not dead but alive, not mute, but filled with sounds, not cold, but warm, welcoming and uplifting. From the point of view of Dilthey’s *Weltanschauungslehre*, Simmel’s philosophy of life clearly belongs to his third category of metaphysics (“objective idealism or pantheism”) in which “universal sympathy” with all life comes to fruition and expression. In a passage that could have been written by Hartmut Rosa, the founder of the *Geisteswissenschaften* evokes the sense of elation of a resonant universe that animates the romantic worldview: “In this contemplative relation our emotional life is enlarged to a kind of universal sympathy. By virtue of such an enlargement of ourselves in universal sympathy, we fulfil, experience and animate (*erfüllen und beleben*) the whole of reality through the values we feel and the efficacy, by which we enjoy life (*das Wirken, in dem wir uns ausleben*), with the highest ideas of the beautiful, the good and the true. The moods that reality evokes in us, we find again in reality. And to the extent that we expand our own sense of life into a sense of empathy with the world as a whole and experience our affinity with all the appearances of reality, the joy of life increases and our awareness of our own strength grows” (Dilthey, 1931: 114-115).

In “objective idealism”, vitalism and pantheism fuse into a romantic vision of the “inner outer world” (Novalis-Gehlen). In its striving to overcome the tension between the soul and the forms, feeling and reason, the inner and the outer, the personal and the universal, the spirit and nature, romanticism expresses and articulates the longing for a meaningful re-union and fusion of two sources of the modern self (naturalism and expressivism). Charles Taylor rightly stresses that the romantic identification with nature should be understood as a moment within the modern constellation. It presupposes a self-consciousness of the human in relation to the world that does not seek to deny the autonomy of the human being, but to bring it to full expression in and through language. The objective idealism of the *Sturm und Drang* includes and transcends the idealism of freedom: “The romantics belonged to two streams of Anthropocentrism, freedom and the voice of nature within” (Taylor, 2018: 62). Notwithstanding its double gesture towards both theo- and bio-centrism, romanticism stays within the anthropocentric fold of enlarged humanism. This is the case because it assumes that the human relation to nature is symbolically mediated. According to the romantic philosophy of language, though the signs may really inhere in nature, we, humans, need symbols to make the world speak again. We do not merely register things, but through language, poetry and philosophy, we make them come alive so that we can mimetically share the life of things, plants and animals. When this happens, the relations to the world outside (to the mountains and the oceans, the flora and the fauna) start to resonate within. We feel elated and connected to the universe.

*Lebensphilosophie*

As a philosophical movement, *Lebensphilosophie* has been thoroughly discredited by fascism. The intellectual sources of German *Lebensphilosophie* are Nietzsche, Dilthey and Bergson (Scheler, 1955: 311-339). There are traces of irrationalism in all of them - more in Nietzsche and Bergson, much less in Dilthey whose professed ambition was to develop a “critique of historical reason” along Kantian lines. Ideologists of the Third Reich recuperated all three. The influence of Nietzsche (via his sister) on German national socialism and Bergson (via Sorel) on Italian fascism is a historical fact. Both Hitler and Mussolini were political vitalists. Leaving aside Nietzsche´s violent anti-humanism, which continues unabated in contemporary post-humanism, from Foucault to Agamben and Deleuze to Braidotti, I am not convinced, though, that the philosophy of life is to blame for the “destruction of reason”, as Georg Lukács (1953: 351-473) claims in his polemical reconstruction of the path that leads from Schelling to Hitler. The irrationalism and anti-intellectualism that have discredited *Lebensphilosophie* are more associated with the radical critique of civilisation one finds in the work of Ludwig Klages and Oswald Spengler than in the philosophy of culture of Wilhelm Dilthey and Georg Simmel. I am therefore tempted to interpret the contemporary return of *Lebensphilosophie* as symptomatic of a romantic longing for reconnection to, and resonance with, a greater whole from which modern humans have been increasingly cut off.

The affirmation of life is a response to the disenchantment of the world. I think it is far more Apollonian than Dionysian in its outlook. It does not affirm the will to power, but the will to connect. It does not want to destroy, but to conserve. The power it wants to enhance is not the “power-over” (*Herrschaft*), but the “power-with” people experience when acting in concert. Its basic stance towards life is “convivialist”, to use a term that perfectly expresses the longing for deep re-connection (Convivialistes, 2013). Its first declaration is one of interdependence between human communities and societies, but also between humans and non-humans. In a world that is torn asunder by hubris, violence and war, convivialism does not ignore the agony of agonistics. Because its aspiration to harmony, beauty and companionship is continuously frustrated, it underscores the creative potential of humanity and asks with Marcel Mauss “how we can live together with our differences without massacring each other”.

Romanticism can be reactionary, but in-of-itself it is neither anti-rationalist (see Schelling) nor anti-modernist (see Simmel). It represents rather a countercurrent within modern thought that is perfectly compatible with a renewal of humanism and critical theory. The anthropology of life, for instance, is both romantic and critical. In a heartfelt protest against the ravages of an industrial capitalism without limits, it rediscovers and revisits the philosophy of life. By giving agency and voice to non-humans, it spells out what it means to be human in the age of the Anthropocene. By showing how life and death are intimately connected in the wastelands of late modernity, it nurtures resilience and urges resistance. The ethnographies of the “counter-anthropocenes” typically combine a radical critique of global structures of domination (colonialism, neoliberalism, extractivism) with a moving appeal to identification, mimesis and attachment. When the sad passions of hypercritique are sublated in a joyous affirmation of life, mourning becomes regenerative, while critique gives way to reconstruction (Vandenberghe, 2018). Post-humanism is the cultural expression of our age (or is it, perhaps, of our rage?). This interpretation supposes, however, that post-humanism remains within the bounds of a temperate anthropocentrism and does not veer off in the irrational exuberance of a virulent anti-humanism that, now as then, flirts with nihilism. The “anthropology of anthropology” I propose here as a variation on Dilthey’s “philosophy of philosophy” welcomes post-humanism as an ally. Its anti-humanism is not essentialist, but strategic. It forces us to enlarge our vision of humanism beyond the human.

As a worldview and philosophical stance that emphasizes the dignity of human beings, their “common humanity”, as well as their moral responsibility towards other species, humanism does not neglect our “common naturality”. If one understands humanism as the philosophical articulation of a “species ethics” (*Gattungsethik*) that spells out “the self-understanding of humanity as a whole” (Habermas, 2001: 32), its relations to other species necessarily have to enter the discussion. Today, an ethics of the human species does not exclude, but most emphatically includes an ethics of life. Species ethics embraces the ethics of species. This is not only the case because the survival of humanity as a species presupposes that life on Planet Earth can be sustained, but also because species ethics is a philosophical hermeneutics of the Anthropos that needs to be periodically revised as new understandings of world-relations come to the fore. Ecological sensibilities have significantly changed over the last fifty years, and even more dramatically so over the last decade. Greta Thunberg says out loud what a significant proportion of the population thinks, feels and fears. Extinction Rebellion in the UK, Letzte Generation in Germany, the Zad-ists in France and Via campesina in Brazil think that talking doesn’t help any longer. As spokespersons of endangered lifeforms and exponents of alternative forms of life, their voices must be heard. The contemporary appraisal of life as a cardinal value and the injunction to treat all life with respect and care are perfectly compatible with a self-reflexive humanism that has overcome the old anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment. Unlike the old humanism, which was naturalist, positivist and productivist, the new humanism is cosmopolitan, culturalist and convivialist. Ecohumanism fully acknowledges the value of life in its different forms and welcomes different cosmologies that express different relations to the world (to self, others and Gods in nature and society) as multiple realisations of what it means to be human. The humanist contemplates the unity of humanity in the multiplicity of its expressions over time and across space. By showing us that other forms of life are possible beyond the Western one, by interpreting our naturalism as one cosmology among others, by opening up our form of life to other forms of life and other lifeforms, cultural anthropology invites us to deprovincialise our anthropocentrism and rekindle our humanism.

*Deprovincialising Anthropocentrism*

In *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Descola, 2005), the anthropologist Philippe Descola presents an inventory of the visions of nature one finds in different cultures across different continents. To reduce the numerous world-visions and world-relations to workable proportions, he proposes a structuralist typology that distinguishes four basic “cosmologies” (totemism, animism, analogism and naturalism) that define the possible relations of human beings to the world and to the others, human or non-human, imaginary or real. He calls theses cosmovisions “ontologies”, not worldviews, because the latter suggest that there’s somehow a single world of which the various cultures have a particular vision or a single nature on which the various cultures have a singular perspective. In the *The Forms of the Visible,* Descola (2021) extends the analysis of the modes of “worlding” presented in his influential book with an investigation of the modes of imagination and figuration in the arts. Once again, he avoids the term of worldviews. This time because he wants to focus on processes of iconic signification and eschew the association between worldviews and symbolism. The backbone of his inventory of worldviews is a “combinatorial analysis of the mode of relations between entities” (Descola, 2005: 16). The matrix is basically constituted by various modes of structuration of individual and collective experiences by means of “practical schemas” of pre-predicative categorisation that define identities and relations between beings. These practical schemas function like “cognitive habituses”. They are sets of generic, general, transposable, embodied and unconscious dispositions, partly inherited, partly acquired through socialisation, that structure the practices of worldmaking (or “worlding”) in a given cultural area. The most important mode of structuration and objectivation of experience from which he will deduce the fourfold typology of worldviews is “identification”. It pre-defines at a pre-reflexive level how a body and a soul, an externality and an interiority, a physicality and an intentionality, will be conceived, perceived and evaluated. While all cultures acknowledge this distinction between external, observable entities and more elusive internal and spiritual ones, they do not draw it in the same fashion. Depending on their practical schemas, they will organise the relations between humans and non-humans differently.

Totemism, animism, analogism and naturalism establish different relations of identity/difference and continuity/discontinuity between nature and culture. In totemism, which was studied by Durkheim, Mauss and Lévi-Strauss as a form of representation and classification, bodies and souls share the same physical and moral qualities of the entity under which they are sorted. The identity of the entities that are grouped under a totem (such as the one of the Bear, for example) serves to mark the difference with other groups that are classified under a different totem (say, the ones of the Eagle or the Tree). In animism, as we have seen and as it has been studied by Descola among the Achuar, Kohn among the Runa and Viveiros de Castro among the Araweté, all entities partake of a soul and are persons, some of which are human. All entities have an interiority and intentionality that is of the human type; they differ with regard to their bodies, which define the perspective in which things appear and establish the differences between human and non-human persons. In analogism, which corresponds to the epistémè of the Renaissance which Michel Foucault (1966: 32-59) has described with such incredible talent in the second chapter of his *Order of Things* (“The prose of the world”), all entities are related to one another through a series of relations of correspondence that establish universal sympathy between everything that exists in the universe. This worldview, which we have already encountered in our discussion of the metaphysical systems of objective idealism, also exists in China and India. Nowadays, it survives in astrology, numerology and alternative medicine. Its specificity consists in the fact that it maximises the differences between the entities - alle entities are singular -, while inserting them in a cosmic order where each singularity is uniquely located. Via a complex set of relations of resemblance (homology and analogy), each singularity represents the whole, which is hologrammatically present in all and in each of the quiddities. Last but not least, naturalism, a late comer in human history, matches our modern Western worldview. It is so naturalised and taken for granted in our culture that it corresponds to our ontology, to the way reality *is*, as it is established by the sciences and formalised by critical realism. In this perspective, nature exists out there in relative independence from the conceptions we may have of it. Unlike the foregoing worldviews, which precede modernity and maintain a mythical, magical and spiritual aura, naturalism radically disenchants the universe. Where others cultures see continuity between nature, culture and the supernatural, naturalism establishes a radical rupture between the soul and the body, the world within and the world without. It works with the assumption that, thanks to their intelligence, language and tools, humans are different from all the other living beings, whereas their bodies, living or inert, are all similar: Bodies are not moved by spirits, but mechanically by external forces that impinge on them and are governed by natural laws. To discover these laws, the sciences systematically objectivate nature and disconnect it from lived experience and from the lifeworld. They submit it to experiments and measurements that aim to formulate the laws of nature in mathematical language. The result is a world in which an individual, cut off from other individuals or inserted in a community, differentiated from other communities by its culture, is facing an inert, mute world devoid of life. With the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, the distance between the subject and the object, the individual and the world, *res cogitans* and *res extensa* becomes maximal. “The dualism of the individual and the world now became irreversible: this was the keystone in a cosmology where things governed by laws and the thought that organises them into meaningful sets: on the one hand, the body―now regarded as a mechanism―and, on the other, the soul that governs it, as was intended by the deity. Nature, stripped of its marvels, was now offered up to the child-king, who, dismantling its workings, emancipates it from nature and subjugates it to his own ends (Descola, 2005: 122-123).

The professor of the Collège de France plays through the whole gamut of cosmologies, but for different reasons. He has a personal interest in animism (his fieldwork in the Amazon), a theoretical interest in totemism (his loyal opposition to Lévi-Strauss), a historical interest in analogism (the worldview that precedes modernity) and a civilisational interest in naturalism (the hegemonic worldview). In the matrix of structural relations between the worldviews, the opposition between naturalism and animism stands out. Naturalism inverts all the characteristics of animism. Whereas the latter assumes continuity between souls (panpsychism) and discontinuities between bodies (multinaturalism), naturalism posits continuity between bodies (mononaturalism) and discontinuities between cultures (multiculturalism). The basic tendencies of the two cosmologies are indeed opposed. Where animists tend to personify everything and everybody, including all beings in a community of souls, naturalists tend to reify the entities. At the limit, everything that exists is reduced to a number. With persons on one side and things on the other, the polarisation could hardly be starker. Personification and reification are indeed incompatible, though at the end when “the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1987: 25), they may well turn out to be complementary.

In one of the most emblematic texts of the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Horkheimer tease out the dialectics between myth and Enlightenment, animism and naturalism, mimesis and control. The Enlightenment wanted to extirpate animism, fetishism and other superstitions by the root through rationality. Science disenchants the world and depersonalises the world-relations to submit nature to technological control. To control nature, the mimetic relations between humans and non-humans had to be replaced by objective relations between things. As a result, “the multiple affinities between beings are supplanted by a relation between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object, between rational meaning und its accidental bearer” (id., 33). As the distance between the rational subject and the objective world increased, the living connection with nature was increasingly lost. Instrumental control left behind a meaningless world. Eventually, it became clear that the extirpation of superstition had transformed naturalism, positivism and productivism into another mythology. “Myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity’ (id., 31) […] Animism had endowed things with a soul, industrialism turned souls into things” (id., 52). Meanwhile, the dialectic of the enlightenment has again gone up a notch. Adorno and Horkheimer were mainly concerned with the effects of formal-instrumental reason on “second nature” and gave no systematic attention to the destruction of “first nature”. Their critique of formal-instrumental reason had implications for ecology, but they were more interested in aesthetics. The mimesis they were invoking was first and foremost the one of “non-auratic art”, which they opposed to the reification of science and technology.

In the work of Jürgen Habermas, the successor of Max Horkheimer at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, the relations with nature are exclusively conceptualised as subject-object relationships. In a critique of Herbert Marcuse´s request of another science and technology that would no longer dominate nature, but reconcile humanity with it, he presents science and technology as a project of humanity as a species. The associations with capitalism and class are contingent, according to Habermas, and there’s no alternative to science and technology as we know it. Naturalism is simply the default mode for our relations to (natural) nature. He concedes that another attitude is possible - one in which we observe and encounter the other not as an “object (*Gegenstand*) of possible technical control”, but as a “partner (*Gegenspieler*) of a possible interaction” (Habermas, 1968: 57). He restricts it, however, to the social and cultural realm. Habermas’s critique of Marcuse’s romanticism and his rejection of the mythical project of the “resurrection of nature” (ib., 54) may have been plausible half a century ago. But since then the world has changed and the relations to nature as well. As a result, the opposition between Habermas and Heidegger, which is played out by proxy in this debate with Marcuse, has been dislocated to the benefit of *Gelassenheit*, being in peace with and as nature. Or, as Adorno (1980: 177) phrased it in *Minima Moralia*: “*Rien faire comme une bête* [Doing nothing, like an animal], lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky, ‘being nothing else, without any further definition and fulfilment’ (Hegel)”.

Now that we are slowly heading towards the edge of the Anthropocene, we know that the reification of “first nature” leads in the end to the destruction of “second nature” as well. Treating nature as nothing but standing reserve is suicidal. Roy Bhaskar puts it more brutally: “The destruction of nature is not only murder, but suicide, and must be treated as such” (quoted in Vetlesen, 2015: 4). Our fear of self-destruction has become so intensive that we turn to ancestral wisdom for guidance. As industrial production dialectally turns into the destruction of nature, the old magical worldviews come back to teach the moderns a lesson of life. While animist ontologies have been succeeded in many places by analogist ones, which from the 15 th. and 16th. century onwards have been replaced in turn by naturalist ones, at least in the West and now increasingly also everywhere, the naturalist tendency towards universal reification is now compensated by a tendency towards re-personification and re-spiritualisation of the universe, conforming thereby once more Dilthey’s sequence of naturalism, subjective idealism and objective idealism.

*Alienating Reification*

For us, Westerners, naturalism is our natural worldview. Even if one is an anthropologist, it is not easy to become an animist, totemist or analogist subject. As I am aware of the difficulties of converting from one cosmology to another, fully attested by generations of ethnographic experience, I will try another way. Instead of “going native”, I will try to show that the other worldviews are seeping into ours and dissolving the boundaries between nature and culture, humans and non-humans, us and them. Post-humanist anthropology is a sign that the naturalist hegemony is fissuring. In the arts as well, there are indices that the naturalist cycle has reached its end and that “primitivism” is making its return (Descola, 2021: 559-587). The other worldviews do not enter ours in pure form, however. They are altered, adapted, diluted, translated, reformulated, appropriated and digested in ever-new forms of post-modern syncretism. Animism, for instance, returns in deep ecology, new materialism and neo-shamanism. Totemism resurfaces on the skin, in the cultural appropriation of tribal tattoos and piercings among youth. It is also massively present in sports (the Red Lions in Belgium, the Rooster in France) and, I have been told, also in videogames. The whole of New Age culture may be considered a revival of analogism in post-secular societies. To show that the distinction between humans, animals and spirits are being redrawn, I will not go into popular culture, though. I will extend my “anthropology of anthropology” into a “sociology of sociology” that registers the transition from a “human exemptionalism paradigm (HEP)”, which “treats human societies as if they were exempt from ecological constraints”, to a “new ecological paradigm (NEP)” (Catton and Dunlap, 1980) as an indicator of emerging new structures of feeling. The new ecological paradigm acknowledges that humans are an exceptional species, but stresses that they should nonetheless be viewed as one among many interdependent species. Painfully aware of human finitude, it underscores universal interdependence and intergenerational solidarity. As humans are responsible for ecological destruction, they have to assume even more responsibility and change their world-relations and world-visions.

To capture the spirit of new times, I will practice a “reverse anthropology” of naturalism that situates “our own exotism as a particular case of a general grammar of cosmologies” (Descola, 2005: 165). By reversing the gaze, I want to make naturalism strange and alienate reification, if I may formulate it that way. Like in Bertold Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, I want to redouble the alienation, make it tangible and visible, to break its hold over our minds. What I am after is a “deep hermeneutics” that estranges us from our cultural estrangement from nature and makes other relations to the world, to animals and spirits, minimally plausible. The tactic I’ve chosen is to play through some of the tropes of critical theory (alienation, fetishism and reification) to relax and release some of its ingrained assumptions. In the same way as humanism has embraced post-humanism to overcome the limitations of its anthropocentrism, it has taken in post-structuralism without becoming fully post-structuralist, post-modern or post-humanist. Thanks to post-structuralism, multiple waves of scholars have learned to deconstruct the binaries, unthink some of its background assumptions and destabilise its certainties. As they got accustomed to its suspicious readings, they started to appreciate its virtues. By making visible some of the gendered and racialised subtexts of their disciplinary discourses, they learned that nature is produced, performed and fabricated by cultural practices. Everything that is socially constructed can also be changed. French theory contributed immensely to the deconstruction of essentialism(s), making identities unstable and fluid through critique. Radicalising the “defetishising critique” (Benhabib, 1968: 44-69) of Hegel and Marx, philosophical deconstruction and social constructivism lifted the ideological veils on cast, race, gender, sexuality, animality, etc. The Studies finished the work of critical theory and denaturalised the remaining evidences.

When the distinction between nature and culture was fully deconstructed and debunked as a convention, nature came back with a vengeance. There was something objective, natural, - Adorno would say “non-identical”- that remained, resisted, objected to objectivation. The tension between a post-structuralist position that tends towards the negation of nature (“sex and race do not exist, they are constructed by racist and heteronormativist discourses”) on the one hand and a more ecological one that embraces and endorses nature as a lively site of intrinsic beauty and value on the other has split the left into an idealist camp of cultural Marxists (it includes post-structuralists) and a materialist camp of eco-philosophers (it excludes humanists). Between the old Hegelian-Marxists who struggle with their anthropocentrisms and the new Deleuzo-Spinozists who cherish all anthropomorphisms, there are many intersections and thus also profound differences when it comes to the use of critical categories, like alienation, reification and fetichism, which carry the humanist heritage as baggage or ballast.

When post-structuralism morphed into post-colonialism, the evolutionist and hierarchical assumptions of critical theory also came into the open. Even the critique of the money and commodity fetish, a central piece of Marx’s critique right in the opening chapter of *Das Kapital* (“The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof”, Marx, 1962: 85-98), turned out to be a colonial trope and trophy that says as much about our vision of them as it says about us. The descriptions of the animist worship of fetishes, which one finds in the travelogues of European merchants and clerics visiting West Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, associate it to witchcraft and, using Christian concepts, also to superstition and idolatry (Pietz, 2002). In *On the Cult of Fetish Gods* (1760), Charles de Brosses transformed the concept of the fetish (from the Latin *facticius* and the Portuguese *feitiço*) into an Enlightenment theory of fetishism that remains formative of the social sciences up till today. Paraphrasing Hume’s natural history of religion, de Brosses inscribed animist rituals and beliefs in ancient Egypt and West Africa into an evolutionist history of religion that doubles as a history of the world. Fetishism appears as the most elementary form of religion, before polytheism and underneath of animism, because it worships not animals, but inanimate things and trifles. It personifies things, ascribes magical qualities to objects that are randomly encountered, commits categorical errors, ignores the true mechanistic causes of natural events and remains attached to sheer materiality. Never attaining the stage of symbolisation, the objects are hideous and affect directly, through incitation, the febrile minds of those who venerate the statuettes and amulets. Notwithstanding their ugliness, they were lifted to European museums as “art objects”, which now raises the delicate question of restitution (Mbembe, 2020: 313-362).

Notwithstanding its phantasmagorical and projective character, suited to its own naturalist cosmology, the theory of fetishism is, as Bill Pietz (2022) has shown in his remarkable genealogical reconstruction of the category of the fetish, one of the “inaugural moments” of the social and human sciences. One finds it not only in Marx´s political economy, but also in Freud´s psychoanalysis and in Comte´s positivism. If one takes Marx, Freud and Comte together, one can reconstitute half of the intellectual matrix of the contemporary human sciences. The one that is explicitly naturalist; the other half, which is historicist and culturalist, has other sources (Vico, Hegel, Dilthey). Of the three, Auguste Comte is, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, the master thinker who might be the most promising to rethink our relation to nature. Following his bout of madness, which he compared to a “descent into fetishism”, he significantly revised his original position (Keck, 2005). During his second career as the founder and high priest of the religion of humanity, he no longer analysed fetishism from the point of view of a scientism that disconnects the human from nature as it progresses from the theological to the metaphysical and the scientific stage. Fetishism was now understood and reinterpreted as a necessary stage of universal significance in the history of humanity. Thanks to its affect and imagination, its role in the coming emotional unification of humanity was seen as pivotal by Comte, who was convinced that its reintegration within positivism would help the latter to overcome the opposition between nature and culture, science and the arts, affect and reason. Paradoxically, this surprising reintroduction of animism into naturalism, which manifests itself in a sentimental attachment to the Earth, represented as the *Grand fétiche* in the heart of Brazilian flag, makes positivism a forerunner of ecohumanism and a sentinel of the new spirit of the age.

*Things, Animals and Humans*

If we now analyse the modern world from the vantage point of a sociology of life that seeks to estrange it from itself to reveal the deep cultural subtexts that continue to structure our lifeworlds, we can generalise the Marxist analysis of reification and consider it as a particular instance of a general case of brutalist relations to the world - to others, to animals and even to things, each of which are mishandled in different ways that are detrimental to their - and our own - flourishing. In the Marxist tradition, reification refers to a systemically induced miscategorisation of human beings as things that manifests itself in real life, objectively, by an ontological degradation of human beings and, subjectively, as an alienation from one’s own essential being (Vandenberghe, 1997-1998). For Marx, reification is inseparable from commodification. The capitalist system presupposes the generalisation of the commodity form, which, to extract exchange value, has to transform human beings - in fact, their labour power - into something that can be sold and bought on the market. In capitalism, value seems to inhere in the object itself, but in reality, it is the objectivation of a determinate social relation of exploitation which remains invisible: “It is nothing else than the determinate social relation of men themselves that here assumes for them the phantasmagoric form of a relation of things” (Marx, 1962: 86). Reification should not be taken literally, though, of course, to extract the surplus value, capitalists will not always eschew the dehumanisation of their employees. In his trenchant critique of contemporary brutalism, the latest phase of Western colonialism, Achille Mbembe takes the metaphors of extraction, combustion and reification literally. Counterposing animism to naturalism and extractivism, he exposes with lurid examples, drawn from the fields of mining and migration, the becoming-object of humanity: “The transformation of humanity into matter and energy is the ultimate project of brutalism. (Mbembe, 2020: 11) […] Fracturing, fracking and depletion do not only concern resources, but also living bodies exposed to physical exhaustion and to all sorts of biological risks (acute intoxications, cancers, congenital anomalies, neurological troubles, hormonal disturbances). Reduced to a slick and a surface, it is the whole of life that is subject to seismic threats (id., 9) […] There’s a becoming-object of humanity as a counterpoint to the becoming-human of objects. We are the ore that our objects are destined to extract” (id. 16)

To extract value from the human being, capitalism does not only transform the human into a thing. According to the young Marx, it also transforms the human into an animal. Work, which should be the medium of self-expression and self-realisation, is no longer and end in itself. It becomes a mere means of survival. Working to satisfy their basic needs (eating, drinking, procreating), the workers who have to sell their labour power are debased to the animal level. “What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal” (Marx, 1968: 515). Reification is therefore also the equivalent of bestialisation. Treating human beings as animals may be even worse than treating them as things or commodities. The reduction of the human being to the animal level degrades the human being. Slavery, which treats humans as working animals and beasts of burden that can be bought and sold, recognises them as living beings, but only to submit them to a ruthless, cruel and inhuman form of exploitation on the plantations. Marx did not fail to denounce slavery as a moral abomination, but he considered the plantation and industrial capitalism as two different economic systems and circumvented the issue of slave labour. He had even less to say about the exploitation of animals.

The comparison between human and non-human slavery is insensitive and offensive, but if the distinction between humans and animals is specious, as the abolitionist approach to animal rights claims, it may have a point. In *The Dreaded Comparison*, Marjorie Spiegel (1988: 25) argues that the point is not to degrade the human but to elevate the status of the animal: “Comparing the suffering of animals to that of blacks (or any other oppressed group) is offensive only to the speciesist: one who has embraced the false notion of what animals are like”. Indeed, if the line that was arbitrarily drawn between black and white people has been successfully challenged and dislocated, why can’t we do the same for the division between human and non-human animals? In any case, even if one does not want to go as far as granting personhood to all nonhuman animals (including jellyfish, fleas and worms?), one should not treat them as things. There is no doubt that nonhuman animals are self-aware, sentient beings with the capacity to suffer. From this “pathocentric” argument, one can then derive various positions in the philosophy of animal rights (rights-based, utilitarian, ethics of care - see Garner, 1996: 1-60). One may argue with Kant that animals are “subjects-of-a-life” and cannot be regarded as means to an end (Tom Regan). With Marx, one may want to defend abolitionism on the grounds that animals need only one right, the right not to be owned as property (Gary Francione). Like Bentham, one is entitled to defend a utilitarian position and grant them rights to life, liberty and freedom from torture (Peter Singer). If one doesn’t grant them human rights,one ought at least to treat them as humanely as possible and guarantee a minimum of welfare so that that they have reasonably pleasant lives and relatively painless deaths. With eco-feminists and eco-humanists, we might also want to go further than welfarism and extend the ethics of care, as well as the ethics of communication, recognition and resonance, to human-animal relations. This is in any case the moral background for most of the research on, with and about animals in the new fields of “human-animal studies” (Roscher, 2022) and the “sociology of anthropozoological relations” (Michalon, Doré and Mondémé, 2016). When they study representations of animals as symbols of distinction, as expressions of social tensions or controversies, when they investigate animal societies, transspecies intersectionality, vegetarianism, veganism and animal rights activism, but also when they critically analyse the objective conditions of animal life in modern societies, at home, in the farms, in the zoos, in the circuses, in laboratories and in slaughterhouses, when they investigate interactions between the mahout and the elephant, the blind person and the dog, the horse and the rider, the whale and the autist child, in all cases a new sensibility, a new worldview and a new world-relation that transcends the epistemological blinders and the moral blindness of Enlightenment naturalism comes to the fore. Animal standpoint epistemology has not only opened up a new field of study; it has also disclosed new ways of being in the world that show what human and nonhuman animals are capable of.

The new philosophy of life also has implications for our visions of matter. It suggests that even things can be reified, reduced to inert, dead matter, to things. In his sociological re-creation of Leibniz’s monadology, Gabriel Tarde opposed himself directly to Émile Durkheim, inverting his first rule of sociological method. Instead of treating social facts as things, he envisioned a society in every fact: “Everything is a society” (Tarde, 1999: 58). He went on to develop a general sociology that would not only study human and animal societies (Espinas), but also cellular and atomic societies, and even astral societies and solar systems. More recently, new materialists who take their cues from Deleuze and Latour also contest the ontological partition between live and dead matter. In “dogged resistance to anthropocentrism” (Bennett, 2010: xvi), they want to revitalise and energise things and give them agency by reinserting them in heterogeneous assemblages with causal power. Matter is motion, moving at variable speeds. “The stones, tables, technologies, words, edibles that confront us as fixed are mobile, internally heterogeneous materials whose rate of speed and pace of change are *slow* compared to the duration and velocity of the human bodies participating in and perceiving them. Objects appear as such because their becoming proceeds at a speed or a level below the threshold of human discernment” (Bennet, 2010: 58). One of the arguments of vital materialists is that the human is not exclusively human. Like everything else, humans are made up of cells, bacteria, tissues, bones and other vibrant matter. If one varies the scale and switches from the molar to the molecular level, one will see swarms of electrons, swirls of atoms, flows of energy. Things are not substances, but processes, not beings, but becomings, not structures but events. Things are never alone, but always related to other things that are composed in turn of other things. Much like Russian *matryoskhi* dolls, one will always find smaller bodies inside things and vibrant energies inside bodies. It’s things thinging all the way down. Any attempt to conceptually fix things in the form of a substance arrests the motion of matter and kills the thing itself through reification.

I am moved and affected by the poetic beauty of animal studies and “thing theory” (Brown, 2001) - which I just discovered as I was Googling for “thing studies”. In their attempt to overcome the limits of naturalism, they are rediscovering the romanticism of the *Naturphilosophie* of the eighteenth century, the *Kulturphilosophie* of the nineteenth and the *Lebensphilosophie* of the twentieth century. Following the lead of Wilhelm Dilthey, I have considered neo-animist, neo-fetishist and neo-vitalist attacks on naturalism and mechanicism with sympathy as cultural critiques of modernity within modernism that express a heartfelt longing for a re-union of humans and non-humans in our common house - the *oikos* of beings. I remain unconvinced, however, by their “dogged” (“pig-headed”) rejection of every form of anthropocentrism, which at times borders on “neganthropism”. Not only I am not sure that we can overcome anthropocentrism. The critique of reification has also convinced me that we shouldn’t overcome it. Precisely because I feel that some things should not be degraded to things, it is important to maintain the categorical differentiation between humans, animals and things for normative reasons. If we fail to affirm the dignity and value of human beings, we may well authorise the treatment of people as mere things. The categorical imperative to distinguish the ontological regions does not mean that one cannot deconstruct and dislocate the boundaries that separate the regions from each other. The distinction between nature and culture cannot be upheld. The categorical imperative to treat humans always as ends in themselves does in no way justify that one treats nonhuman animals or even things without care or consideration. The moral reflection on what it means to be human is precisely what defines the human. The affirmation of our common humanity does in no way exclude the declaration of our common animality. Because we, humans, are also animals. Humanism is the philosophical articulation of the moral self-understanding of humanity in relation to its others. When the relations change, the self-understanding has to change as well to align worldviews and world-relations in a more inclusive cosmology that respects, protects and nurtures life. Now that the “biological agent” that we are has become aware of the “geological force” it has, we must use the power we have together to bend the moral arc towards universal solidarity among and with all sentient beings. Because at the end, the relations we have with non-humans reveal and express the truth of who we are.

**Coda**

Instead of a conclusion, a mantra and a prayer.

*Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu*

Let all the worlds be happy!

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness.  
May they be free of suffering and the cause of suffering.  
May they never be disassociated from the supreme happiness which is without suffering.  
May they remain in the boundless equanimity, free from both attachment to close ones and rejection of others.

(Traditional Tibetan Buddhist prayer)

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1. This text was written as a contribution to the Workshop “Worldrelations – Humanism – Resonance”, jointly organised by the Max Weber Kolleg in Erfurt and the University of Humanist studies in Utrecht. It took place on the premisses of the MWK in Erfurt on 17/4/ 2023. I thank the participants for their presence and engagement. Apologies for the overload of references. During the writing of this piece I discovered how the combination of Library Genesis and an electronic tablet can boost scholarship - and save trees. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I have done that elsewhere in a book on biotechnologies and capitalism, cf. Vandenberghe, 2006. This is my second go at post-humanism. My first incursion was devastating and led me down the dead end road of “enlightened catastrophism”. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. It’s not just in Paris… Hoffman’s Buchandlundung in Weimar, one of the oldest bookshops in Germany which served Goethe and Schiller, also stocks a similar collection of books on the social life of foxes, whales, wasps, lichens, gardens, etc. The owner told me she had started the collection eight years ago and that it was quite a success. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Already in 1989, Félix Guattari (1989: 34) had issued a warning about the emergence of strange mutants and feral proliferations, caused by the deterioration of the natural, social and psychic environment in the United States: “Another type of algae, belonging this time to social ecology, consists in the freedom to proliferate that is given to men like Donald Trump [!] who seizes whole quarters of New York, Atlantic City, etc. to ‘renew’ them, raise rents and expulse thereby tens of thousands of poor families, the major part of whom are condemned to become ‘homeless’, the equivalent of dead fish in environmental ecology”. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)