

Original article

## The issue of anthropocentrism in ethics

### *La cuestión del antropocentrismo en la ética*

Evandro Agazzi

*Interdisciplinary Center for Bioethics, Panamerican University of Mexico City, Mexico City, Mexico*

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#### Abstract

Criticism against “anthropocentrism” has become frequent in recent bioethical literature, especially after the increasing favor enjoyed by animal ethics and environmental ethics. In an action there is usually an acting subject and an object that is affected by the action. Moral responsibility only concerns the subject and it is clear that only subjects endowed with the capability of understanding and deciding can be morally responsible. In this world only humans have such capability; therefore, only man is a *moral subject* and can have *duties* in a proper sense. These duties regard man’s conduct towards the object of an action, and ‘traditional ethics’ distinguished duties towards God, oneself and others (therefore not only man was the object of moral duties). In ethics a reciprocity’ between *duties and rights* is often recognized: one has a duty towards someone which has the right to receive a certain treatment and is in principle morally obliged to reciprocate this treatment. The concept of *responsibility*, however does not entail reciprocity: we may be responsible towards beings that do not have the same duties towards us. In such a way it is ethically right to admit that we have duties also towards animals, environment, future generations, that have no rights in a strict sense, and cannot reciprocate our care for them, We can say that, in this sense, man is not the only ‘moral object’ (i.e. the object of moral duties). This position is even better expressed through the moral category of *respect*. In this perspective it is possible to recognize to man a particularly high position in the ‘ontological hierarchy’ of the existing beings, without making of it the only morally relevant object. This amounts to the imperative not to destroy or damage any form of existence without an adequate reason, and this is why not whatever interest of man can morally justify damaging other forms of existence, but only according to a reasonable judgment of necessity and proportionality.

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*E-mail address:* [evandro.agazzi@gmail.com](mailto:evandro.agazzi@gmail.com)

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## Resumen

Las críticas al “antropocentrismo” se han vuelto más frecuentes en la literatura bioética especialmente después del favor que encuentra la ética animalista y del medio ambiente. Hay habitualmente en una acción un sujeto que actúa y un objeto afectado por la acción. La responsabilidad moral concierne sólo al sujeto y, claramente, sólo sujetos dotados de la capacidad de entender y decidir pueden ser moralmente responsables. En este mundo sólo los seres humanos gozan de dicha capacidad y por consiguiente sólo el hombre puede ser *sujeto moral* y tener *deberes* en un sentido riguroso. Estos deberes conciernen a la conducta del hombre hacia los objetos de sus acciones y en la ética tradicional se distinguían deberes hacia Dios, sí mismo y los otros (entonces no el sólo hombre era objeto de deberes morales). Se reconoce a menudo en la ética una ‘reciprocidad’ entre *deberes* y *derechos*: uno tiene deberes hacia alguien quien tiene derecho a recibir un determinado tratamiento y está moralmente obligado a reciprocárle el mismo tratamiento. Sin embargo el concepto de *responsabilidad* no implica reciprocidad: podemos ser responsables hacia seres que no tienen el mismo deber hacia nosotros. Por tanto es éticamente correcto afirmar que tenemos deberes hacia los animales, el medio ambiente y las generaciones futuras, que no tienen derechos en un sentido riguroso y no pueden reciprocarnos el cuidado que les otorgamos. Esta concepción es hasta mejor expresada en la categoría ética del *respeto*. En este sentido podemos decir que el hombre no es el único ‘objeto moral’ (es decir, el objeto de obligaciones morales). Dentro de esta perspectiva es posible reconocerle al hombre una posición particularmente elevada en la ‘jerarquía ontológica’ de los seres existentes sin hacer de él el único objeto moralmente relevante. Esto se traduce en el imperativo ético de no destruir o dañar ninguna forma de lo existente sin una razón adecuada, y es por esto que no cualquier interés del hombre puede justificar moralmente dañar a otras formas de lo existente, sino sólo en base a un juicio razonable de necesidad y proporcionalidad.

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*Palabras clave:* Sujeto moral; Objeto moral; Reciprocidad ética; Derechos y deberes; Responsabilidad; Respeto; Ética animalista; Ética del medio ambiente

## Loosening ambiguities

When we speak of ethical anthropocentrism today it is usually understood that we are making allusion to a certain conception of ethics which should be overcome. In other words, anthropocentrism, like ethnocentrism, eurocentrism and other forms of “centrism”, would be already in itself a kind of distorted perspective. In the case of ethics, in addition, anthropocentrism would be affected by a very serious

drawback consisting in putting man “at the center” of the moral sphere, as used to do (so it is said) the ethical doctrines of the past, whereas the level of criticism attained today requires the overcoming of such a one-sidedness.

Considering this thesis, the first task is that of analyzing the concepts, and these appear used in an ambiguous way, not so much because that of “center” is more an image than a concept: indeed it is possible to replace it with the little more intellectual notion of essential, specific or even privileged “reference point”. The knot which we need to disentangle concerns the *kind of reference* that ethics makes (and perhaps should not make) to man as a reality which is for it fundamental, exclusive or even only privileged.

### **Ethics and morals. Man as the only moral subject**

A first clarification follows from the analysis of the meaning of the concept *ethics*. This can be understood, in a rather technical sense, as an analytic and foundational discourse *about* morals; or, in a more usual sense, as a simple synonymous of morals. In both cases we need to make precise what is the meaning of “morals”, and it seems difficult to deny that morals consist in a set of norms and principles aimed at regulating the *human actions*. Therefore, it is clear that there is at least a sense according to which ethical anthropocentrism is not eliminable, the sense in which only man can be a *moral subject*, that is, a being whose actions can be qualified as morally good or morally bad because only man (among the beings existing in this visible world) is endowed with the capability of understanding and deciding in a proper sense. At the same conclusion we arrive by noting that this specifically moral character of a norm (different, for instance, from the legal, customary, conventional, pragmatic character that can be attributed to other kinds of norms) consists in the fact that this norm be characterized as a *duty* (that is, to use a Kantian terminology, as a *categorical imperative*). Only man is considered to be a subject of *duties*.

Also something more: when philosophers have tried to characterize the specific essence of man, in comparison with other beings of the world, it has been very often maintained that this specific essence consists in the fact that man is a moral subject. This idea has been explicitly advocated by Socrates, and abundantly developed in the judeo-christian tradition (for which the mark of that famous similarity with God which is man’s privilege consists precisely in his being able to freely make the choice between Good and Evil, and even in the fact of having become somehow

participant of the divine “knowledge of Good and Evil”). This moral connotation of the human nature is strongly reaffirmed in Kant’s philosophy, just to remain with the most famous examples. Therefore, in the whole Western thought, morality is essentially linked with man and man with morality.

### **The object of morals**

We pass now from the consideration of the subject to the consideration of the object of morals, that is, of the moral norms and duties. Here too the problem of the “reference point” appears, but under a different perspective. Indeed the human action has in itself a relational nature, since it establishes a relation between the acting subject, on the one hand, and “what he/she does” on the other hand, and for a given action, its being or not being in conformity with morals does not depend on the fact of being performed by a human being (since this being can perform morally good as well as morally bad actions) but on what we can call the *content* of the action. Therefore, the different moral norms prescribe *what one ought to do* or not to do.. This fact can be expressed by saying that moral norms determine duties *towards* someone or something which, in this sense, can be considered as the *objects* of our duties.

An exception to this conclusion seems to be the Kantian ethics, according to which not the content, but the *form* of the imperative characterizes the morality of an action: morally good are only those actions that are performed exclusively *out of duty* (we could put it synthetically as “performing duty for duty”). Nevertheless, a little deepening of the Kantian ethics shows that this amounts to conforming with the deepest nature of practical reason (that is, of morality as such, as it is conceived by Kant): to act uniquely for the respect for duty is equivalent with respecting the moral nature of man. Therefore, the Kantian ethics expresses the concept of a fundamental duty that man has *towards himself*, and it is not by chance that the most famous of the formulations that this philosopher has offered in order to give a minimal “concrete” sense to the abstract categorical imperative consists precisely in the prescription of the absolute respect for *humanity* (understood as human nature) in ourselves and in the others<sup>1</sup> (Kant, 2005). Therefore, the Kantian ethics is strongly anthropocentric also as far as the *contents* are concerned, despite the fact that its explicit formalistic perspective makes it difficult to determine (within it) the con-

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<sup>1</sup> This formulation says: “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” (Kant, 2005).

tents of the different moral norms and, for this reason, it has been submitted to well know criticisms<sup>2</sup>. (Scheler, 1913, 1973).

### **The traditional morals and the theocentric ethics**

When criticism is leveled against the alleged anthropocentrism of “traditional ethics” this very vague reference is not intended to go back to ancient Greek philosophy, but rather to the ethical doctrines elaborated in the West during the Middle Ages and Modernity. Therefore, we shall briefly outline certain basic features of these traditions. In order to determine the norms for the morally right human action, *other beings* besides man, were taken into consideration, with which human actions have to do, and from this consideration certain *moral obligations* (or *duties*) were derived. It is known that such morals distinguished three fundamental classes of duties, those towards oneself, those towards God and those towards others. Already this fact obliges one to recognize that traditional morals were not exclusively anthropocentric from the point of view of their objects, since they affirmed at least duties towards God. The duties towards others were, actually, considered as duties towards other human beings and it is not easy to see included in them also duties towards other non-human beings, that is, towards Nature at large. This is true only in part since certain prescriptions regarding respect for animals and things can be found in the *Bible*, but there is no doubt that no body of explicit norms regarding the morally correct way of behaving towards natural non-human beings is present in traditional morals. This fact, however, has an explanation at the level of *ethics*, considered in its most technical sense, that is, as a reflection in which the foundations of morals are investigated. Indeed, during many centuries the West has lived within a *theocentric* view of reality: God, being the Creator of everything, has imposed to the human beings his *will*, by dictating them through a revelation a list of fundamental moral norms or “laws”, susceptible of a variety of particular applications. God’s will, however, did not express itself only through his commandments, the whole of *creation* is the product of this will. Therefore, the only really fundamental moral duty, that is, that of respecting the will of God, also entails the duty of respecting the *order of creation*. Within this moral obligation is included, in the first place, the duty of respecting the human being (that occupies the hierarchical highest rank among the natural beings), but it also includes the respect for Nature, at least implicitly and within certain limits (precisely of a hierarchic kind since Nature is in part subordinated and at the disposal of man). Therefore, the *theocentric founda-*

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<sup>2</sup> The most famous work criticizing Kant’s formalistic ethics is certainly (Scheler, 1913, 1973).

tion of morals, typical of traditional ethics, though continuing to attribute only to man the characteristic of *moral subject*, ended up in non-anthropocentric morals as far as the objects of moral norms are concerned.

### **The ethics of Modernity**

The theocentric perspective undergoes a slow decline in the Modern Age and this produces (at least initially) changes not so much in the domain of morals but rather in the field of ethics. The commonly accepted morals, which were also defended by philosophers, continued to propose, essentially, the *contents* of traditional morals of Christian roots, whereas the *justification* of those contents (i.e. of the concrete norms) was no longer linked with the will of God. The complex and not univocally defined concept of *natural law* took up that role. On the one hand, this concept mirrors the influence of the new intellectual “authority” of Modernity, that is, of the new *natural science*: its declared (and efficiently realized) task was that of discovering the *natural laws* of the physical world, where they are endowed with universality and necessity, and this induced people to conceive in a similar way also the moral laws as “natural” laws (such an analogy is maintained even by Kant<sup>3</sup>, in spite of his clear distinction between the domain of morality and the domain of the physical world and of scientific knowledge). A simple analogy, however, could not be satisfactory: what Nature are we referring to, when we speak of *natural law* in the context of morality? Certain authors have maintained that moral laws must be uncovered through the consideration of the *natural order*, understood in the broadest sense, that is, as encompassing the structure of whatever exists (and in such a way those authors continued to adhere to the idea of an *axiological value* of the order of creation, though putting the Creator, so to speak, “in brackets”). The most developed line, however, was that in which the *foundation* of the moral laws was looked for in an analysis of the *human nature*. In this sense, the ethics of Modernity appears really *anthropocentric*.

### **Man as the source of morality**

A deeper and more subtle sense of the ethical anthropocentrism comes out when we consider the question of the *cognitive source* of the moral laws. According to the

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<sup>3</sup> Let us only consider the first formulation of the categorical imperative: “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.”

theocentric approach, such a source was primarily the divine revelation. According to the new approach, the *human reason* becomes such a source, which tries to derive moral principles and laws from the consideration either of the human nature itself, or from the natural order of the universe. We must note that such a task of reason had been recognized also by several schools of thought belonging to what we have labeled as the theocentric age of Western civilization: it is sufficient to mention Thomas Aquinas, according to whom man has received from God reason as the specific mark of his *nature*, that is, the capability of attaining truth both in the strictly cognitive domain and in the domain of action. This *lumen naturale* constitutes (regarding morality) what is usually called the *moral conscience* with which every human being is endowed, and this conscience gives him prescriptions of behavior that he has the *duty* to obey in the concrete cases. Due to the uncertainties of the human judgment, however, God wanted as well to reveal his commandments; therefore, no contrast can exist between these commandments and the moral laws uncovered through the exercise of the human reason, since God is the source both of the commandments and of the natural light of our conscience. Once the reference to God is bracketed (as it happens in modern thought), only the *rationalist* pattern of this discourse remains, and the *natural law* is understood as the moral law that the human reason is capable to establish by itself and was later distinguished from the *positive law* which, instead, is posited by a certain authority (usually the State, but also God himself).

Within the framework of this perspective it is possible to recognize an additional sense of the ethical anthropocentrism: man is not only a moral subject, but also the one who *judges* on what is morally right or wrong. The man of which it is spoken here is not the *single* individual, but rather the human reason in a rather abstract sense. Moreover, at least in a first stage, it is not considered as the faculty that *institutes* or establishes the moral law, but as the faculty that *recognizes* it in its objectivity (since this law was considered as rationally derivable from an examination of nature, be it cosmic or simply human). Along this path, however, the extreme consequence soon appeared, the consequence of the total *autonomy* of reason in its moral exercise understood in the following sense: it is the human reason, in its constitutive task of providing indications for action (that is, in its function as *practical reason*) that *gives to itself its own laws*. Certainly not in an arbitrary sense, but according to its own nature. It is not difficult to recognize that, in such a way, was attributed to the human Reason (abstractly understood) that characteristic that the theological thinking had attributed to the divine law, when it had tried to avoid the *arbitrariness* that would affect such a law if it were purely an emanation from the divine will. The solution of this difficulty sounded as follows: the moral law is *freely*

posited by God but, on the other hand, it cannot avoid prescribing what is *intrinsically* good because it is the expression of the *nature* of God who is the highest Good. When the further developments of modern thinking led to a gradual dismissal of the idea of a universal human Reason (that is, of the “transcendental” point of view), in the place of the universal Subject only the variety of the individual subjects remained, and the consequence has been the ethical subjectivism of the present time and the affirmation of the *autonomy* and *free choice* of every subject as the distinctive feature of morality. In this last stage, the ethical anthropocentrism attains its most radical and extreme forms.

### **The sense of the current criticism of ethical anthropocentrism**

The foregoing considerations are rather extended, yet they are not sufficient to capture the most hidden core of the current polemical attitude against ethical anthropocentrism. Indeed those who reject what they call ethical anthropocentrism do not intend to deny neither that man is the only moral subject, nor that it belongs to man the capability of expressing moral judgments, of looking for the foundations of moral norms and of taking autonomous decisions concerning his actions. What is denied, instead, is that man must constitute the only being *towards which* direct moral duties exist, in the sense that even when we should recognize also certain duties towards other non-human beings, these duties would be justified, in the last analysis, *in function* of man himself. Therefore, this is the additional sense of ethical anthropocentrism that we must still examine, before passing to check the strength of the criticism addressed to it. We have already hinted at this problem when we have dealt with the issue of the *object* of moral norms, of moral concern, of moral duties, but now we want to address this issue from a broader point of view, by discussing certain notions that are central to the ethical discourse.

### **Liberty, rights and duties**

In a secularized world, like that of modern civilization, that in addition has promoted the *free individual* to being the protagonist of life and history, also morals had to receive a special configuration. Ceasing to be understood as the obligation to conform the human *will* to the divine *will*, moral norms had inevitably to take the form of limitations of that *freedom of action* of those individuals who are actually endowed with such a freedom, that is, the human beings. In this way the principle was reaffirmed that only man is a moral subject, a subject, however, that is characterized



by an essential liberty to which he has an essential, inalienable (and “natural”) *right*. It is not by chance that modern thought is characterized since its beginning by the effort of determining an increasingly broad display of *human rights*, understood as spheres of freedom of action in a broad sense. This liberty cannot be violated even by the highest power (i.e. by the State). As we have already seen, it is precisely this freedom which is considered as the root of the moral *duties* and also as the root of the *human rights*.

In this way the complex issue appears of the relations between rights and duties, which is already shaded in the famous maxim: “my freedom ends where other persons’ freedom begins”, a maxim that can be translated by saying that my rights must be made compatible with my duties. There is, however, much more: the logical corollary of this principle is that the *exercise* of my rights (and it is precisely the exercise more than the abstract possession that is implicit in the conception of liberty as freedom of action) can be legitimately claimed by me to the extent that I fulfill myself my duties.

### **The dimension of reciprocity**

This corollary is implicitly supported by the notion of *justice* which cannot avoid relying upon this fundamental dimension of *reciprocity*. This seems a concept specifically belonging to the legal domain, more than to the moral proper, but this is not true: one can say at most that in the idea of justice we find a link between ethics and law, which no philosophy of law can avoid to consider (independently of the solutions proposed for this problem). An indication that it is not just a question of legal philosophy may be represented by a celebrated statement of Gandhi, according to whom the only undisputable human rights are those which derive from the accomplishment of one’s duties.

Inside such an optic, ethical anthropocentrism appears inevitable. According to this approach the moral subject has *duties* only *towards* those which, in turn, have certain *duties* and fulfill them (without this condition they could not have any *right* to pose limitations to my freedom of action). We have already seen, however, that only human beings can have duties; therefore moral duties can only be duties of human beings towards other human beings.

Nevertheless, a deeper analysis of the moral conscience brings to light the inadequacy of such a foundation relying on the structure of *reciprocity*. Indeed two

typical figures of the moral sphere, that of *responsibility* and that of *respect*, oblige us to go beyond reciprocity, since neither of them entails reciprocity.

### **The concept of responsibility**

As we will see now, the consideration of reciprocity is not really decisive. For example, we accept as a very obvious duty that of taking care of our children, of elderly or ill persons, though we cannot expect to receive from their side a reciprocal behavior towards us (Hans Jonas, for instance, has devoted very valuable investigations to this “principle of responsibility” (Jonas, 1979, 1984) which he considers as the most salient constituent of the moral attitude). Nevertheless, it is possible to include the consideration of reciprocity also within the concept of responsibility. For example, we can say that we “reciprocate” towards our children that duty of protection that our parents have had towards us, and the same can be repeated regarding our duties of care towards sick persons, elderly persons, future generations. In short, responsibility can be interpreted as a kind of “broadened reciprocity” as a consequence of the *universality* of moral obligations, that is usually admitted in ethics. Therefore, we would still remain within an anthropocentric perspective, since our duties of responsibility would still concern other *human* beings which (in the past, the present and the future) are thought to be the subjects and the objects of the same duties.

If we remain within this framework it is not possible to give an adequate foundation for the duty to take care of Nature and animals and, as a matter of fact, many authors justify such a care, in the last analysis, by arguing that, without this care, we risk to jeopardize the survival or at least the “quality of life” of the future human generations. The same Jonas supports this argument (though in subtle and more elaborated ways), and it is clear that this still remains a disguised form of ethical anthropocentrism: the protection of Nature is not a duty in itself, but is only *instrumental* to the fulfillment of the duty of responsibility towards other humans (i.e., the future generations).

### **The concept of respect**

Different is the situation with the concept of *respect*. If duly analyzed, it expresses the idea that the beings to which we ought respect are endowed with a kind of *intrinsic* value which (morally) excludes that they can be *totally* at our disposal (that

is, that *towards* them we can exercise our unlimited freedom of action). This new moral category does not *necessarily* entail the overcoming of anthropocentrism since it remains to be clarified what other categories of beings possess such an *intrinsic* value. Kant, for example, has written some of the most beautiful pages regarding the *dignity* of the (human) person, meaning by this its *intrinsic* value, greater than whatever price or value of use, and has derived from this a formulation of the categorical imperative that imposes to *respect* every person and never treat it simply as a means but always also as an end in itself. It is clear that here too we do not overstep ethical anthropocentrism.

Nevertheless the category of respect *can* lead us beyond anthropocentrism if we admit that whatever exists possesses a certain intrinsic value and, therefore, can be used, modified and even destroyed only in the presence of *adequate reasons*. An indication of the fact that our moral conscience accepts such a principle is offered by the fact that, even in the case of inanimate beings, we consider morally reprehensible to destroy or damage them without an adequate reason, and the degree of our disapproval is measured in proportion with the intrinsic *value* we attribute to the object in question. If the object is a work of art, we shall consider its esthetic value, in the case of a relic we shall consider its historic value, in the case of a stalactite in a cave, , the value will depend on its beauty and rarity, and so on. From these examples one can see that the moral respect is grounded on the consideration of an *ontological hierarchy* to which also an *axiological* dimension is attributed (that is, a proportional attribution of *value*).

### **The consideration of an ontological hierarchy**

It would be naïve to ignore that, in order to advocate the thesis we are proposing here, it is inevitable to retrieve that notion of the adequacy of the human actions to the *natural (or ontological) order* that characterized traditional ethics, but it seems impossible to do otherwise. Indeed, it would be illusory to affirm the general principle that *whatever exists* must be respected, cannot be used, manipulated, destroyed, simply because the structure of the world is such that the different beings live (i.e. can exist) only *at the expenses* of other beings. Therefore, the respect for what exists *must* include the acceptance of the “conditions of existence” of the different forms of what exists, including the destruction of some of them in order that others can exist. Therefore, also as far as man is concerned, it conforms to the structure of the existing reality the acceptance of the fact that he can (because he is obliged to do so) use and destroy other forms of the existing beings. Essential is that

such a use and destruction occur, so to speak, with regret and within the limits in which it is really necessary in order to secure to man the conservation of his life and the survival of his species, besides a reasonable quality of life.

Within this order of beings it conforms to reason to recognize that the highest respect is due to God (for those who admit his existence), since the maximum of perfection of being is realized in him. It is then equally reasonable to admit that, among the beings of the natural world, the highest degree of respect is due to man, since he is endowed in a purely ontological sense with several qualities that are not shared by other natural beings. This can be recognized through a factual analysis as well as by adhering to an evolutionist view or by adhering to certain metaphysical or religious doctrines. This respect, however, extends also to other natural beings, according to a decreasing order of intensity that is proportional to their decreasing degree of ontological complexity. So animals deserve a greater respect than plants because, for instance, are capable of suffering, of actively fighting for their own survival and, therefore, it follows that it is a moral duty to avoid killing them or producing them suffering as far as this is possible and compatible with the satisfaction of *proportionate* values concerning the life of man.

### **A cosmocentric approach**

One could object that also the perspective proposed here is, in the last analysis, anthropocentric because it concludes by attributing to man a privileged position in the context of Nature. Things, however, are not precisely like this. Our is a *cosmocentric* perspective because the highest respect recognized to man is attributed to him *only* in consideration of the higher rank that he occupies in the ontological structure of the cosmic order and not simply because we have to do with man (this would amount to accepting that position which is discredited today under the label of “specism”, that is, as if it were simply a form of selfishness of the human species). Moreover, and this is a decisive point, we have excluded that *whatever* interest of man can morally justify *whatever* form of damaging non-human beings. We can also add that, whereas other living species tend to their self-preservation and well-being without caring about the damage they could produce to other species existing in Nature, or about the suffering produced to other living beings, man is endowed with a *moral conscience* (and this is one of the clearest marks of his ontological superiority) precisely because he can put himself the problem (and we can add that it *must* put this problem) of minimizing the damages and suffering that, by assuring his survival and wellbeing, he can cause also to non-human beings.

## The natural and the artificial

Moreover, the right of man to use and manipulate Nature derives from his particular *nature*, that is, from that kind of being that *he is*, in comparison with other living species. In fact, man can be seen as that particular animal species whose survival and flourishing do not depend on his capability to *adapt himself* to the environment, but from the capability of *adapting the environment* to his needs. A really important consequence derives from this fact at the ethical level (though we do not go into this discourse here since it is not strictly related to our issue), that is, that the artificial cannot be seen as morally negative in principle, in the name of the respect for nature, because the said respect must concern in particular also the human nature, and this is characterized by the fact of flourishing through the creation of the world of the artificial: the artificial is the true *natural environment* of man (i.e. the environment proportioned to his specific nature). It immediately follows that the moral criterion of respecting Nature (which is common to various ethical trends still today) imposes that we also respect the right of man to use and manipulate Nature, as well as the fact of considering the artificial itself as that part of Nature which derives from the particular nature of man.

## Conclusions

Ethical anthropocentrism is not that distorted position that certain scholars attack today. Not only because, as we have seen, there are several senses of this concept according to which it is impossible to eliminate it from any discourse that wants to be specifically ethical, but also because it is possible to make compatible the higher ontological position of man without falling into arbitrary one-sided positions (that is, without considering the rest of the real as a *pure means* for the satisfaction of *whatever* goal of man). In particular, the problem (today acutely perceived, and which is the chief motive for the rejection of the so-called anthropocentrism) regarding the right moral attitude that we ought to take towards Nature must be solved by finding, in every *concrete* situation, a fair balance between the *right* of man to satisfy his natural needs (understood in a suitably broad sense) and the *respect* due to all natural beings, in proportion with their ontological dignity.

If one has correctly understood the aim and spirit of our reflections can easily see that the sense in which we recognize the legitimacy of anthropocentrism essentially amounts to rejecting that distorted portrayal of this concept which is

too often presupposed in the defense of the “rights of animals” and the “rights of the environment”, and which could be better called “anthropo-imperialism”. In fact, the said defense is based, on the one hand, on the recognition of the *difference* and, on the other hand, on considering the difference as something valuable in itself and such as to overcome all other values. Therefore, all beings and kinds of beings are ultimately put on an equal footing when one comes to the issue of how to treat them when we interact with them. The first impression is that we ought to treat them in the same way, without “privileging” some of them over others. Unfortunately, however, it is a well-known principle of justice that iniquity consists not only in treating differently those who are equal, but also in treating equally those who are different. Therefore, many discourses celebrating “inclusiveness” and “no-discrimination” risk to be simply rhetorical and “edifying” if they are not supplemented by additional clarifications regarding the aspects under which the differences can be ignored or even appreciated. When we speak of “aspects” we inevitably involve the presence of *judgments* and, therefore, of human *subjects*. In our proposal we have tried to reduce this intervention of human subjectivity to a *minimal* degree, that is, to the recognition of a rather elementary ontological order of complexity among the beings that populate the cosmos. Nevertheless one cannot ignore that, owing to his symbolic capability, man usually attributes value to numberless things, from a piece of cloth that becomes the almost sacred symbol of one’s fatherland in the case of a national flag, to stones, plants and animals that are worshiped in different countries, to buildings, written texts, ceremonies, actuations that are constituents of what is usually called human “culture”, and – together with the enormous world of technology – shape what we have called the needs of the human “quality of life”. Therefore, the “deconstruction” of subjectivity proposed by Derrida (just to give an example) and offered as the ground for the unconditional appreciation of whatever “difference” could not become a ground for advocating a correct behavior among existing beings without recovering implicitly the subject, who is the bearer of an *attitude towards* the rest of the “other” beings. Derrida calls this attitude “hospitality” (Derrida, 1997, 2000), and claims that it must be total, absolute and unconditioned, being open for this reason also to animals and the environment. Obviously, it has been enthusiastically welcome by many fans of animalist and ecologist movements, but, if stripped of its sentimental flavor, it leaves unsolved too many problems (for example, must we extend this hospitality also to bacteria and viruses that attack our body?). Therefore, advocating a relation with “other” beings guided by the consideration of “adequate reasons” for not transforming anthropocentrism into anthrop.-imperialism and exploitation seems the best way of approaching this issue.

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