

LUCA VALERA, FIORENZA TOCCAFONDI

THINKING THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS INTRODUCTION

A global ecological crisis cannot be merely considered a probable or distant event anymore. The ongoing climate change, the numerous scientific data available, and the amount of published thematic research confirm the fact that we are currently experiencing such a crisis. It is therefore as necessary as ever to approach the present crisis from different points of view and approaches, to offer a complex understanding of the issue, avoiding possible scientific reductionism or simplification.

When we talk about the “ecological crisis”, indeed, the very notion of crisis does not belong to the semantic domain of the so-called hard sciences, but rather to philosophy or the so-called social sciences or humanities. Consider, for example, the issue of sustainability, which is at the center of countless current debates and encompasses ecological, ethical, social, legal, and economic perspectives.

Essentially, we might consider the current ecological crisis – which is primarily an existential issue – as an open and interdisciplinary field of dialogue, in which even the theological (or, more precisely, religious) dimension does not hold a minor or secondary role. Indeed, the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’* has demonstrated the relevance of the religious perspective in this realm, showing how ecological issues are fundamentally “ethical”, that is, bound to the “care for our common home”. These are, indeed, ethical issues since our relationship with nature is now *value-laden*, namely, it is essentially defined by the power we have over it. Once again, these are ethical questions, because, through this power

over nature, we have become capable of radically altering it at will – effectively transforming it into the object of our responsibility.

The enormity of the forces – or the power – humanity has acquired (as a collective subject, following Jonas’s reasoning [Jonas 1984; see also Pommier 2015]) broadens not only the scope of our theoretical consideration of reality but also the possibilities available to us, among which looms the threat of destruction. Power (in its specific form as “technological power over nature”) thus becomes ambivalent in the contemporary era, as it carries both the potential for improvement and progress, as well as the threat of destruction. Faced with this curse or menace, the search for solutions – whether technical or technological – almost spontaneously gives rise to an underlying unease, one that is not satisfied by technical answers because it ultimately presents itself as an existential condition. The sense of guilt – a notion clearly outside the realm of science – thus accompanies the awareness of a sin committed through technological means, as Robert Oppenheimer reminds us with his famous 1947 lecture at MIT. It is intriguing that a physicist like Oppenheimer had to resort to another extra-scientific notion – i.e., sin – to describe a catastrophe brought about by new technologies, rather than relying on experimental data. The ecological crisis is, above all – let us reiterate once again – an existential crisis. In this sense, since it is fundamentally existential, it invites us to think about it using appropriate tools, namely philosophical resources.

Ultimately, the ecological question challenges us on how we “dwell the world” and, as such, is not satisfied with merely “technical” answers. It is within this framework – new technologies and new powers, the necessity of an ethical shift, emerging questions and concerns, and the search for a response to a dizzying existential condition – that we can interpret the new relationship between ecology and philosophy.

In this sense, philosophy can still play a key role in helping us re-think the current ecological crisis, clarifying concepts and paradigms, and offering hermeneutical keys to current events. The link between ecology and philosophy is indeed very strong, not only because of Haeckel’s [1866] studies – he was a renowned biologist and zoologist as well as a philosopher – but also because ecology has often ventured into the realms of anthropological and cosmological reflection. In this sense, the ecological concern is now a philosophical issue: evidence of this is

seen in the emergence of environmental philosophy during the 1970s, along with environmental ethics. As early as the late 1940s, however, with the publication of Aldo Leopold's celebrated work [1949], *A Sand County Almanac*, the need for a "land ethic" was already being highlighted. A few years later, with the dissemination of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* [1962], environmental ethics began to gain acceptance and attention among the general public, being used as a political tool to denounce irresponsible human behaviors toward the environment. In those same years, with Lynn White Jr.'s famous article [1967], moreover, ecology became part of theological speculations on a "scientific" level. In the 1970s, the environmental issue finally became a matter of public concern with the release of the Club of Rome's report, *Limits to Growth* [Meadows *et al.* 1972], which brought the topic of sustainability – a central issue in environmental philosophy – into focus. In those same years, the famous *Deep Ecology Movement* was born thanks to the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss [1973]; this event definitively contextualized the ecological question within philosophical speculation [e.g., Passmore 1974], partly disentangling it from the excessive reliance on scientific data. It is worth noticing that much of earlier environmental philosophical speculation is configured as a response to the tendency to reduce nature to a set of symbols and mathematical formulas, a tendency inherent in the scientific method informed by modern science. This dissatisfaction with an explanation of the world based solely on a such method is primarily directed at the informative character typical of modern science: the latter seems to identify abstract and universal structures, latent schemata in nature, without fully capturing our concrete experience of being-in-the-world.¹ The discourse is quite different if we look at the world as a biophysical system, as Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen [1972; 1989] urged to do – already in the seventies of the last century. Since the planet's resources are finite, the exploitation of natural resources – wrote Georgescu-Roegen – is required to

¹ A good example of this necessity to avoid reducing experience to mere scientific evidence can be found in Næss's philosophy – please see Næss 1989; 1985; for critical works on this topic, please see Valera 2018a; 2018b. Finally, the Chilean philosopher and ecologist Ricardo Rozzi 2007 explains with great clarity Næss's interpretation of scientific evidence concerning an ecosophical standpoint.

adopt the limits that are dictated by the earth system, both about its ability to tolerate the high entropy material that is produced and the finite quantity of its resources (except for solar energy). However, this is inevitably intertwined with the ethical dimension, with a change in our being-in-the-world and consequently with the revision of the economy and its traditional categories. From this point of view, the position proposed in the second half of the twentieth century by the English economist Kenneth Boulding in *The economics of the coming spaceship Earth* is paradigmatic. Boulding introduced a distinction between two types of economy that remained iconic in environmental thought: the «“cowboy” economy» and the «“spaceman” economy». The former exemplified an open and vast economy as were the plains of the cowboy, animated by a «reckless, exploitative, romantic, and violent». The «“spaceman” economy» represented instead what, in Boulding’s [1968] opinion, should represent the economy of the future, where the earth, like a spaceship, should be considered for what it is: a closed system in which everything has limited availability, just as its capacity to receive waste and regenerate its own resources is limited.

Among the reasons for the affirmation of environmental ethics, however, besides the need to fully interpret our relationship with nature, we must also remember the necessity of rethinking the increasingly invasive role of technology in our lives. The technological power acquired by human beings over the past fifty years appears to have led to a radical change, not only in action but also in the very anthropological conception, as Hans Jonas [1979; 1984] pointed out. In environmental ethics, this has largely meant a denunciation of the new destructive human power, the recognition of rights for non-human animals, and a fundamental anthropological pessimism: as Potter (the father of bioethics) [1971; 1988] emphasizes, human beings have become a cancer on the planet, driven solely by an egoistic obsession with possession and exploitation. To solve this problem, over the last two decades a trend of thought known as longtermism has been developed, with leading exponents such as philosophers as Nick Bostrom and Will MacAskill [e.g., Bostrom 2002; 2003; MacAskill 2022; for the critique of longtermism see, e.g., Torres 2021a; 2021b]. According to this perspective, we have a moral duty to prevent the disappearance of humanity and thus guarantee life for future generations. Nevertheless, the characteristic of longtermism lies in the belief that we must assume

this responsibility by referring to a very remote future, very far away on a scale of millions and millions of years. Assuming this scale, the logic of longtermism is that this goal – namely, human survival – has a better chance of being achieved through the colonization of some planet [e.g., Bostrom, 2003]. As MacAskill [2022, 102] writes in *What We Owe the Future. A Million-Year View*, «if one culture made greater efforts to settle in space or had greater ability to do so, then eventually it would dwarf any culture that chose to remain earthbound». Overall, the impression is that longtermism is not so much interested in mankind and planet Earth, but in humanity itself and beyond planet Earth. However, it is precisely the scenarios of the Earth closest to us, indeed very close to us, that require our most urgent moral commitment, that demand us to rethink the past, the present, and the future of our being-in-the-world. These are indeed dramatic scenarios. For example, Maldives is likely to disappear under water by the end of the century; in South Asia heat waves, floods, and drought will make the situation unsustainable; desertification, sea level rise, and loss of biodiversity will lead to mass migration. In 2020, more than 11,000 scientists from all over the world showed the dramatic reality of climate change in a document. The epigraph of this document reads as follows: «Scientists have a moral obligation to clearly warn humanity of any catastrophic threat and to “tell it like it is”. On the basis of this obligation [...] we declare, with more than 11,000 scientist signatories from around the world, clearly and unequivocally that planet Earth is facing a climate emergency [...]. An immense increase of scale in endeavors to conserve our biosphere is needed to avoid untold suffering due to the climate crisis» [Ripple *et al.* 2019, 1]. The essays contained here question our relationship with the natural world in light of scientific discoveries.

All these are, then, some of the salient reasons for the necessity of a philosophical approach to the current ecological crisis. Moreover, philosophy itself could offer pathways and alternatives to deal with the ecological crisis effectively and pragmatically, guiding political discussion and illuminating possible decisions in this area, both at the particular and national (or international) levels. Because of what has been said so far, this special issue is not intended to offer simply a historical (or historiographical) perspective on the topic of the ecological crisis, but rather a thematic approach to concrete issues associated with the current ecological crisis. Moreover, with this special issue, we aim to posi-

tion the journal within the current international debate, tackling issues of pressing global relevance in today's world. At the same time, however, we seek to reclaim the philosophical reflections emerging from the continental tradition – particularly the Italian ones – in order to shed light on the current international context from a broad and profound philosophical perspective, while preserving the historical dimension of this inquiry. Obviously, as the editors of this special issue, we are fully aware of the vast scope of the topic and the extensive number of publications addressing it at both national and international levels.²

The issues abovementioned are approached here from different points of view, highlighting the main metaphysical/cosmological, epistemological, ethical, and political issues. Furthermore, in this special issue, we delve into a range of topics that bind philosophy to ecology, offering a multifaceted exploration of our relationship with the natural world. The contributions collectively challenge conventional distinctions and propose new ways of understanding the human place in the cosmos [Scheler 2009].

Concretely, seven essays are presented in this issue, offering different perspectives on the current ecological crisis and concerns. First, Righetti's analysis spotlights the critical-negative function of the nature-culture dualism, revealing how this conceptual divide shapes ecological thought. Then, Zamboni Russia focuses on the preservation of inhabited territories, suggesting that rootedness is a vital source of ecology and a key to sustainable development. González Morales and Feltrin focus on relevant international current topics: the former discusses the importance of Biocultural Rights and Biocultural Ethics, underscoring the need for an integrated approach that respects diverse communities; the latter reimagines the concept of wilderness, arguing for a decolonized rewilding that fosters multispecies autonomy and transcends the pristine ideal. Carnevali unveils the hidden Spinozism in Bookchin's philosophy, offering insights into a holistic view that bridges ecological thought and political theory. Finally, the last two papers retake the religious and theological point of view on ecological issues: Cutro examines Panikkar's ecosophical perspective, emphasizing the

² Concerning the Italian context, we only mention the very first contributions to the discipline, and in particular Ciaravolo 1993; Tallacchini 1998; Russo 2000; and Saragosa 2005.

transformative potential of reconnecting with nature at both individual and collective levels; and Borgoño addresses the theological significance of the Anthropocene, investigating the human role as both guardian and co-creator through technological agency.

References

- Bostrom, N. [2002], Existential Risks: Analyzing Human Extinction Scenarios and Related Hazards, in: *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 9, 1-30.
- Bostrom, N. [2003], *Astronomical Waste: The Opportunity Cost of Delayed Technological Development*, in: *Utilitas* 15 (3), 308-314.
- Boulding, K.E. [1968], The economics of the coming spaceship Earth, in: K.E. Boulding (ed.), *Beyond Economics Essays on Society, Religion, and Ethics*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 275-287.
- Carson, R. [1962], *Silent Spring*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin.
- Ciaravolo, P. (ed.) [1993], *Filosofia ed ecologia*, Rome, Pubblicazioni del Centro per la Filosofia Italiana.
- Georgescu-Roegen, N. [1972], The Entropy Law and the Economic Problem, in: *The Ecologist* 2 (7), 13-18.
- Georgescu-Roegen, N. [1989], *Quo Vadis Homo sapiens-sapiens?*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- Haeckel, E.H. [1866], *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen*, Berlin, G. Reimer.
- Jonas, H. [1979], Toward a Philosophy of Technology, in: *Hastings Center Report* 9 (1), 34-43.
- Jonas, H. [1984], *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, London/Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Leopold, A. [1949], *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- MacAskill, W. [2022], *What We Owe the Future. A Million-Year View*, New York, Hachette.
- Meadows, D.H., Meadows, D.L., Randers, J., Behrens III, W. [1972], *The Limits to growth: A report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, New York, A Potomac Associates Book.
- Næss, A. [1973], The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary, in: *Inquiry. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 16, 95-100.

- Næss, A. [1985], The world of concrete contents, in: *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 28 (1-4), 417-428.
- Næss, A. [1989], *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle. Outline of an Ecosophy*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Passmore, J. [1974], *Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Pommier, E. [2015], Life and Anthropology: A Discussion between Kantian Criticism and Jonasian Ontology, in: *Giornale Critico di Storia delle Idee* 14, 121-134.
- Potter, v. R. [1971], *Bioethics. Bridge to the future*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall.
- Potter, v. R. [1988], *Global Bioethics. Building on the Leopold Legacy*, East Lansing, Michigan State University Press.
- Ripple, W.J., Wolf, C., Newsome, T.M., Barnard, P., Moomaw, W.R., Grandcolas, P. [2019], *World Scientists' Warning of a Climate Emergency* <https://hal.science/hal-02397151/document> (accessed February 12, 2025).
- Rozzi, R. [2007], Ecología superficial y profunda: Filosofía ecológica, in: *Revista Ambiente y Desarrollo* 23 (1), 102-105.
- Russo, N. [2000], *Filosofia ed ecologia*, Naples, Guida.
- Saragosa, C. [2005], *L'insediamento umano. Ecologia e sostenibilità*, Rome, Donzelli.
- Scheler, M. [2009], *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
- Tallacchini, M. (ed.) [1998], *Etiche della terra. Antologia di filosofia dell'ambiente*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero.
- Torres, É.P. [2021a], Against longtermism, in: *Aeon*, October 19th <https://aeon.co/essays/why-longtermism-is-the-worlds-most-dangerous-secular-credo> (accessed February 12, 2025).
- Torres É.P. [2021b], The Dangerous Ideas of “Longtermism” and “Existential Risk”, in: *Current Affairs*, 28 July <https://www.currentaffairs.org/news/2021/07/the-dangerous-ideas-of-longtermism-and-existential-risk> (accessed February 12, 2025).
- Valera, L. [2018a], From Spontaneous Experience to the Cosmos: Arne Næss's Phenomenology, in: *Problemos* 93, 142-153.
- Valera, L. [2018b], Home, Ecological Self and Self-Realization: Understanding Asymmetrical Relationships Through Arne Næss's Ecosophy, in: *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 31, 661-675.
- White Jr., L. [1967], The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis, in: *Science* 155, 1203-1207.