

PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS OF THE BIO-ENVIRONMENT

[Dr. Andreja Miletic](#)

Professor of International Relations,
University of Belgrade, Yugoslavia

We could hardly choose a better and more convenient place for our meeting. On the soil of ancient Greece, near its cultural and political heart, Athens, we are in the centre of this wonderful country where, more than two thousand years ago, "one numerically small people, by its universal talent and activity assured such a place in the history of humanity to which no other people can pretend" (Engels). Let some of his genius and wisdom illuminate and guide us in our search for truth and possible perspectives for these crucially important problems and dilemmas mankind is facing at present.

I am glad and honoured to have an opportunity of being among so many distinguished participants from all over the world, some of whom I have the privilege to know and consider as my friends in the common battle for a peaceful and better world in the framework of the United Nations. It is encouraging to know that so many different men from various parts of the globe are ready to leave aside all their professional and other duties and come here to exchange their views of biopolitics and international co-operation. It means that this topic is felt as vitally important and of common concern for all - a real *res communis omnium* - regardless of geographical position, professional occupation, religious beliefs, ideological orientation, cultural background and political belonging.

Let me say in this introductory note that I fully accept this newly coined term "biopolitics", invented and already successfully introduced by Dr. Vlavianos-Arvanitis. In comparison to the older ones - ecology and environment - which, by the way, it does not exclude at all - it has a broader and more active meaning. Namely, it presupposes not only the study and knowledge of "man's home" (*oikos*), that is the earth, and the conditions enabling him to live and survive on it, but equally and active stand and orientation comprising all strategies and practical measures undertaken in order to preserve and improve "bios" on our planet, if I am correct in interpreting the intention of Dr. Vlavianos-Arvanitis. I hope that this meaning will be accepted and supported here in our discussion. In any case, I propose to do so and I personally assume this particular meaning. It should be added that the conditions of survival, as far as man is concerned, encompass not only physical and biological, but also social, political, legal, ethical and other relations, institutions and norms, since man is not only a natural (biological) but also and necessarily a social creature (in Aristotle's terminology). Moreover, the notion of biopolitics should also include, in my opinion, problems arising from actual or possible direct interventions by man into his own bio-psychological substance by means of genetic and other medico-biological manipulations, a process which is at its beginning but whose effect could be incalculable for mankind.

Problems of ecology and environment are not new, but in recent decades they have rapidly grown into a global crisis threatening the very existence of our civilisation. This crisis has multiple dimensions and could be approached from many different aspects - biological, political, economic, technological, psychological etc. This is the way it is treated in ever-growing literature. Some of them will be examined by the participants present here. As far as I am concerned, I shall try to point out some philosophical dimensions of the present bio-environmental crisis as well as of the urgent need for international co-operation in overcoming it. It seems to me that this dimension has been unjustly neglected and I welcome the organisers' decision to put it on our agenda as important. Indeed, it is so important in my eyes, that I accepted to treat this topic although philosophy is not my occupation. In doing so I am completely aware of the risk of being warned, as was the famous shoemaker, not to go beyond shoes. I am afraid I could be accused of imprudence and even impudence and if the anger and punishment of Gods from Olympus and professional philosophers present here fall upon my head, they will be entirely justified. This is not to ask for mercy, but I would not refuse it if it were given to me.

But before I am severely judged, allow me to plead, if not my innocence, at least extenuating circumstances. In this respect, let me go to the very source and remind you that the first use of the verb "to philosophise" in Herodotus' "History" meant "to learn" from reality. Heraclitus first used the noun "philosopher" (*filo-sofos*) in the meaning of a man who loves wisdom and aspires for knowledge. Plato added that only Gods are "sofos", while men are "filo-sofos". For Plato, philosophy is the "vision of truth", an interior light which starts burning in the soul and keeps itself alive. Everybody - I stress everybody - has a duty to discover this spark in himself. It is not an easy task, but everybody should try and not give up. Epicurus also recommends that everyone should be occupied with philosophy because "nobody is either too young or too old for taking care of his soul's health and for achieving the spiritual happiness".

Responding to these appeals coming from times immemorial, am I wrong in believing, with Epicurus, that it is never too late and that wisdom and truth could be at least approached if not reached? Does one enter into the sphere of philosophy by the very fact of being astonished in front of reality, as Plato and Aristotle believed, or is it a particular quality of a very few privileged by nature or, as Hegel thought of himself, condemned by God? Or is it simply, as in my case, a matter of naiveté or ignorance? Or both? Eventually, ignorance was for Socrates, as it is well known by his famous statement "I know that I know nothing", the starting point of searching for truth, whereas naiveté is maybe only the other name for freshness, openness of mind for curiosity and Plato's wonder which he considered as a precondition for philosophy.

One could put a question: What does philosophy have to do at all with problems of ecology and environment? Aren't these problems too vulgar, so to speak, to be a matter of philosophy which aspires high and looks far, treating the being in general and the world as a whole, as well as the sense of human existence and activity? Aren't the domains reserved for science, technology, industry, especially today when it seems, more than ever, that their triumph is absolute and possibility unlimited, including the solution of ecological troubles.

One should say that philosophy and even science, have been only recently concerned with problems of ecology and bio-environment since disturbances in the eco-system in all its aspects (water, air, soil, energy, population, radiation, natural resources, arms, etc.) became evident and grave and their effects already endangered the survival of mankind. That is why the process of "ecologisation" of science, philosophy and politics is forced on man; it is not a matter of academic speculation or fashion, but of necessity. It should be added that this process is late and slow. It has gone far enough to become the general feature of our common consciousness and real behaviour. To put it simply, we neither have become aware enough of the enormity of risk nor have we adapted our behaviour in order to lessen or postpone the danger of not remove it completely. Both science and philosophy, and the same could apply to religion, only occasionally guessed the problem and mostly expressed it sporadically or in a metaphoric and indirect way. Science, elated by its undoubtedly great achievements, was too self-confident, almost conceited, while philosophy too remote, divided and concerned with itself. Behind all this, of course, lay the powerful inertia of practical life. Man, in his struggle with nature, in spite of occasional defeats, managed more and more to subdue it and, all triumphant or simply plunged in life, could not or did not want to see what a high price had to be paid. This was and to a large extent still is the way of structuring and acting of socio-economic and political relations and institutions both within particular societies and world-wide.

Still being in the field of philosophy and, more broadly, in the field of social consciousness in general, it would be useful, for the purpose of this paper, to make a brief review of various attitudes to nature which have been created and crystallised in paradigms. Being from the very start an integral part of nature, although at the same time making continuous efforts to "possess", change and adjust it to his more and more specific human needs, Man necessarily was in constant dialogue with nature, expressing in a particular and often fantastic and distorted ideological manner, each period of his practical stand towards it. Thus, for instance, animism and magic characterised the prehistoric, primitive man (hunter, cattlebreeder, farmer) who was hardly differentiated from nature, dependent on it and incapable of understanding and explaining it rationally.

The ancient world, based on a low level of productive forces (agriculture, handicrafts) established an essentially ecological, adequate and harmonious productive process with nature, which was understood as a whole, rather than as an object to satisfy human needs. As a rule, it was interpreted from a religious point of view, be it polytheistic or monotheistic. However, with the appearance of rational understanding of nature (cosmology) through philosophy and elementary scientific knowledge, materialistic, non-religious ideas came into existence (Tales, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, Democritus, Epicurus, etc.). On a practical level, man's intervention in nature seldom caused what we now call ecological problems (deforestation, overcultivation, desertification).

A new paradigm concerning nature came only with manufacturing as a mode of production and English and French philosophy of the 17th century. Fundamentally it was a mechanistic, analytical, reductionist and strictly determinist model of nature. Descartes is generally considered to be a representative of this new rationalist and analytical way of thinking and understanding of man and nature as mechanism (but still of divine origin). In this context we should also mention Newton's rigid system of causality ruling nature: Galileo's mathematical mechanicism; F. Bacon's antischolastic inductive-empirical method; Leibnitz's mechanistic determinism based on "harmonie preetablie". At the same time, man is reduced to a being standing aside, observing and thinking, instead of an active and practical being, and integral and creative part of nature. Thus Christian-theological dualism of reality and mind found its philosophical expression in separating man from nature (Descartes "res cogitans" and "res extensa"). "Nature itself is reduced to a physical-mathematical, experimental object of study and of practical technological manipulations and so lost its original meaning of man's existential ground and habitat. It is this that represents a deep anti-ecological spirit of modern science, which reflects and complements anti-ecological practical behaviour of capital" (Kirn).

French materialistic philosophy of enlightenment in the 18th century (Diderot, D'Alambert, La Mettrie, Helvetius, Holbach) further developed such a concept of nature, excluding its religious components, while the development of industry and the discovery of new sources of energy encouraged and increased massive exploitation of nature, regardless of the consequences for ecology. Profit was put forward as a "primus mobile" of economy and technology, nature was treated as a mere inexhaustible object of exploitation and the labour force as a means of capital accumulation.

Starting from quite different theoretical postulates, German classical idealistic philosophy from the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century saw nature as the embodiment of mind. It was Schelling who best expressed it saying that nature is a "visible mind" while mind is "invisible nature". A similar idea can be found almost two centuries earlier in Spinoza's monistic and rationalist pantheism, that is the identification of God and nature "Deus sive natura". According to Hegel, nature is only one form which Absolute Mind appears but is not conscious of itself. In that way the contradiction between nature and man is overcome, since both are only stages in the development of Absolute Mind. Nevertheless, nature is "below" man since it is only through him, his science, law, morality, state, art, religion and especially philosophy that Absolute Mind "returns to itself", becomes conscious of itself. So the previous relationship nature-man is maintained though now explained quite differently: nature is now "closer" to man, of the same kind, but still inferior to man who not only comprehends it but also "embodies" his thoughts and projects in it and transforms it.

However, this unity is realised in an idealistic way, in mind and not in reality, although, at least with Hegel, in a dynamic, dialectic manner. Marxism established a new dialectical unity of man (society) and nature keeping Hegel's dialectical method but giving it materialistic interpretation. Thus both mechanistic, simplified materialism of the 17th and 18th centuries, separating man from nature and making him a mere "observer" and "thinker", and Hegel's idealistic deriving from nature and mind, were overcome. In Marxist concepts, man is at the same time a natural and social being, who by his social organised work ("praxis"), adapts nature to his specific human needs thereby transforming nature and also changing and creating himself. So nature remains "man's inorganic being". His relationship with nature depends on the development of his productive forces and relations of production which are established according to the level of the productive forces and change together with them. Since the appearance of private property and class division, the ruling class has always had a privileged position in society; exploiting nature, it also exploits classes without property, usurping their surplus product. That is why Marx, speaking of the capitalist mode of production, states that at the same time it is "undermining resources of wealth: soil and labourer". In contrast, in classless communist society Marx sees the "true solution to the conflict between man and nature as well as between man and man ... existence and being ... reification and self-activity ... freedom and necessity ... individual and human race". As it is well known, Marx almost exclusively paid attention to the relations within society and merely touched the problem society-nature which could suggest that, in his view, the first one was more important and a precondition for resolving the second one. It was also the standpoint of post-marxist thought which for a long time optimistically believed that the establishment of socialist society would automatically overcome ecological problems. It was also considered, until recently, following implicit Marxist (and pre-Marxist) optimism that there were no limits to the development of productive forces and man's control of nature, because of man's unlimited capacity for promoting science, technology, industry, as well as because of inexhaustible natural resources. Only recently, rather late, we realised that it was too optimistic.

This new ecological consciousness, as we have already pointed out, has been created under a strong pressure of rapid and disastrous degradation of the whole biosphere. It penetrates, although not equally, all spheres - philosophy, science, economy, politics, law, education, ethics, art... In some cases, there are suggestions for establishing a particular discipline to treat ecological problems under different names (ecology, natural sociology, geotechnology, noology, geology of sociosphere, biopolitics). This increased consciousness has got its practical political expressions, both at national and international levels (for instance, "Green" political parties and movements, United Nations Environmental Program etc.). This is good and necessary because only a new planetary consciousness and action could put an end to the present suicidal trends. Unfortunately, there are still many more words than deeds. So the warning of Barbara Ward could prove to be true: namely, speaking too much about something creates an illusion that it is really happening, although in fact nothing changes. Inertia, habits, short-sightedness, recklessness and especially egoistic interest of individuals, groups, classes, nations, despite serious warnings, keep things basically unchanged.

Let us ask again: What can philosophy do? Is it anything else but words? After all, didn't Merleau-Ponty define the philosopher as a "man who wakes up and speaks"? That's true, but we would add, together with Duffrenne, that just his waking up urges him to speak, not in order to find or solve problems but to say "what is familiar to everybody, but probably never said", to reveal "what is brightly illuminated, but probably never seen". Once awake, then the philosopher should wake up others, taking the risk of being neither heard nor understood and followed. But this is his fate and he cannot escape it. To what extent, if at all, his waking up will also be the waking up of his epoch, and his speech will reach the mind and the hearts of his contemporaries and move them to act, depends on how deeply and truly he expresses his time. As Sartre says, philosophy is effective as long as the "praxis" which gave birth to it, which supports it and which is illuminated by it, remains alive. Each philosophy is, in the last instance, a thought and a word about its time. It is, according to Hegel, "its time expressed by thoughts".

If it is to be true and therefore "spiritual quintessence of its time" (Marx), philosophy has to encounter the truth courageously and to face the truth whatever it might be. This "truth courage", after all, Hegel thought to be the primary condition of philosophical study. It also has to preserve its independence and freedom: it must not be either "ancilla theologiae" or "ancilla politicae". In the first case it is too detached from reality and deals in pure speculation; in the second case, it serves, contrary to its own nature, the particular, and instead of mind ("nus") it follows interest and power. As the whole history, from ancient time up to the present, teaches, this is not easy to do: rare are the moments, if any, of harmony between "Kratos" and "Ethos", "Dogma" and "Nus".

Philosophy also has to resist the present tendencies of being absorbed and getting lost in science. It should keep a distance but not separate completely: it has to start from and to return to it, but at the same time, to guide and to transcend it. Without philosophy, science is "blind" and disoriented; without science philosophy is detached from reality, empty.

This general rule applies to ecology too. Many modern philosophers and other thinkers stress the insufficiency of the exclusive reliance on science and technology as a way out of ecological crisis. In this sense they indicate the fragmentation of science which, with increasing specialisation, becomes more and more accentuated. Therefore the whole is blurred and neglected. Science is incapable of thinking in the "spirit of totality" and remains "one-sided" closed within the narrow frame of its "subject matter". Just as in grasping the totality, the role of philosophy is irreplaceable.

In this connection, another shortcoming of science should be mentioned. Namely, it doesn't take into account the purpose ("telos") of its own results, not to mention of human activity in general; it focuses on how things happen and what and how anything could be done. The modern, Galilean science rightly rejected the human, subjective "telos" too, that is broader moral, political, cultural and other human implications of its studies, findings discoveries (Kirm). That is why more than once it was astounded to face "post factum" its own results. Many scientific and

technological achievements, even triumphs, over nature prove to produce boomerang effects. Many victories of man over nature turn out to be victories over himself.

Science does all it can do without wondering if it should be done and, after all, if it is allowed to be done. In doing so, it usually treats nature as a mere object of inquiry and, through technology and action, an object "ready" and "condemned" to endure anything and which is, in addition, indestructible, inexhaustible, and completely subject to being conquered and subjugated. Some authors pointed out, as Toynbee did, that such a behaviour could find support, at least as far as the western Judeo-Christian world is concerned, in biblical belief that man has been condemned by God to "be fruitful and multiply and replenish the Earth and subdue it". It seems, in contrast, that the Buddhist concept of "Esho Funi" is based on the inseparable unity and harmony of man and his environment, both having the ultimate basis in cosmic life force.

In any case, philosophy can and must give a necessary holistic and teleological view of overcoming the present ecological crisis, as well as an equally important ethical evaluation of man's relationship with nature. If it is joined in this orientation and effort by religion or whatever other form of human mind so much the better. But it is proper for philosophy to be an open, never finished and critical thought of its epoch, time and again reviewing everything that exists, itself as well. This is, at the same time, both its privilege and its damnation: privilege, because it grasps broader, penetrates deeper and flies higher than any other form of human thought; damnation, because depriving itself of faith it is condemned to push forever - like Sisyphus, who hauled the stone of wisdom uphill, fell down with it every time into doubt and dissatisfaction and returned to the beginning. But, as Camus reminds us, "this is the price to be paid for passions of this earth". Passion, that is a true word. Plato's "pathos" is a "conditio sine qua non" of approaching the world from a philosophical, i.e. holistic, critical, essential and wise point of view. Passion which comprises not only curiosity and wonder, but also wandering and finding, anxiety and confidence, fear and courage, despair and hope. For only in that way, feeling and sharing suffering of its epoch, philosophy can search for remedies. To search but not inevitably to find: faced with the drama of its age, it can escape to hopelessness, nihilism, or return to religion. This is the case of many modern philosophers of existentialism from Kierkegaard to Jaspers, Sartre and Heidegger, as well as of such extreme pessimists such as Stirner, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Spengler or philosophers of absurdity such as Camus. Although in some cases a piercing and lucid criticism of modern society and the alienated position of man is depicted in dark colours ("worry", "fear", "emptiness", "illness to death", "being to death", "world night" etc.), this kind of essentially antihuman philosophy is incapable of being a real "thought of our age". It leads nowhere. Unfortunately, the present historical situation gives a lot of reasons to be pessimistic. The problem of individual suicide, which Camus considered as the only serious philosophical problem, strangely became a real possibility of collective suicide of all humanity. Heidegger's "world night" might easily be a metaphorical expression and presentiment of the "nuclear winter" or any other catastrophic outcome of man's irresponsible and harmful activity in his increasingly vulnerable "oikos". Paradoxically enough, this unprecedented new situation of absolute danger is not a result of his weakness but of his exceptionally great power, the greatest he has ever possessed. The problem is that he is not yet capable of mastering it: in stead of being an instrument for man's "conquest of happiness", his own power is turning against him and could become his grave-digger. The greatest danger for man is man himself.

Therefore he cannot expect salvation only from himself. Gods are either dead or, at least in Judaic, Christian and Muslim religious beliefs, they threaten to bring to an end our world by means of a final judgement.

"The decision" - as Fromm pointed out - "reposes on man. It reposes on his ability to understand seriously himself, his life and his happiness, on his willingness to face moral problems, his own and of his society. It reposes on his courage to be himself and for himself".

Even if philosophy were only a "small wave on the surface of history", as somebody put it, it can and must help him to take a right decision or, at least, not to stop thinking about it. In spite of those who reject philosophy as "metaphysics" and "non-scientific speculation" - as old and modern positivists do - our time is ripe for philosophy. It is crying out for philosophy as a critical re-examination of itself, as an eternal effort to go beyond "how" and to try to say or divine "why?" and "where"? And if Minerva's owl of wisdom really gets out at twilight, it is the true - if not the last - moment for her appearance. For the "voice of philosophy gets an importance in dangerous times", says Hegel, when "interests of everyday life have an enormous importance", when "great material interests" (and I should add, prejudices, stupidities, short-sightedness, egoism, even madness) "and struggles around them take away all powers of mind and all its forces". These are dangerous times and the crisis we call "ecological" is in fact the crisis of human society, of our civilisation as a whole. It is human society which destroys nature, and not vice versa. Nothing essential can be changed in man's relationship with nature unless everything essential is changed in man-to-man relations both inside and among societies. Biosphere cannot be transformed into "noosphere", that is the sphere of mind, as French philosopher Teilhard de Chardin demanded it, unless man's society becomes really human, that is "sofos" or "filo-sofos". That is an enormously difficult task but a necessary and inevitable one. It is not certain that it will be accomplished, but we must not stop trying. All of us. And "perhaps the chief thing that philosophy, in our age, can still do", says B. Russell, is to "teach how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralysed by hesitation". Hesitation means death.

Professor Dr. **Andreja Miletic** graduated from the Faculty of Law, University of Belgrade, and received a Diplome d'Etudes Superieures Europeennes, Centre Europeen Universitaire, Universite de Nancy, France. He obtained a Ph.D. in Political Sciences from the Faculty of Political Sciences, Belgrade, where he now works as Professor of International Relations. He is President of the UN Association of Yugoslavia

and a member of the Executive Committee of the World Federation of United Nations. He has written two books and many articles on the Theory of International Relations, United Nations, Security and Disarmament.