András Lányi  PhD

Associate professor at the Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Human Ecology
Budapest, Hungary

The moral fundaments of sustainability in the European ethical tradition

English translation: Ivan Nyusztay

1 This essay was written as a philosophical summary of a research conducted by Our Common Heritage Research Group (ELTE University of Budapest) in 2009-2010 and supported by the Norwegian Financial Mechanism.
Anthropocentric ethics is possible only when ‘Thou’ replaces ‘I’ in the center of moral thought. This essay argues that attempts at the foundations of modern ‘man-centered’ ethics, bereft of the metaphysical handhold, failed due to the lack of this recognition, and that role has actually been filled by law – either Natural Law or the Law of Reason. The privileged ontological status of man reappears in the philosophy of phenomenology. There, the discussion of intersubjectivity reveals that it is a whole world that belongs to the Self, and it takes but one further step to discover that this world does not merely belong to him, but it is his concern. Environmental ethics does not demand the surrendering of anthropocentrism, but rather, its radical reformulation.

1.
Let me confess I never understood how the faith in the righteousness of God can be reconciled with God’s excessive fury, bringing fire and flood upon the Earth for the sin of man, destroying all its innocent inhabitants together with the sinner. I am not familiar with the standard position of eco-theology on the divine destruction of the environment. So far it seems they still owe us a reassuring explanation for the strikes afflicting blameless nature. The obvious reason that it is only man that matters (“if the hamster dies the terrarium is also thrown out”) is incompatible with an eco-ethics dedicated to the extension of the ethical universe. Historical ecologist Jeanne Kaye, examining the concept of nature in the Old Testament, by-passes pernickety issues when she considers common expiation as the proof of an intimate relation between man and nature, and points out that nature is not merely a sufferer but often also the means of punishment which afflicts the sinner in the forms of natural disasters, drought, plague of locusts and floods. (Kaye 1988) Even more astounding is the fact that the arguments for the responsibility for the coming generations do not include any reference to the justice of the Old Testament punishing the sons for their fathers’ sins unto the seventh generation. However, the retrospective responsibility of the descendants for the deeds of their ancestors do seem to force the recognition of mutual accountability between generations subject to common fate. Our doubts concerning divine justice – or the responsibility of the authors of the holy scripts – evaporate briskly when we realize that these passages from the Old Testament are to be read not in a normative but in a descriptive sense! They do not contain a judgement, but warn us of a factual development, which, alas, we discovered too late, even though truth was staring us in the face. Now we see clearly that the Earth is dying for man’s sins, and that unfathomable suffering will afflict the coming generations for the fathers’ sins unto the seventh generation. So far we could not understand, but now it needs no explanation, so evident this has become in our days.

2.
I think it would be misleading and perhaps unnecessary to trace back a characteristically modern issue, the question of anthropocentric ethics, to the moral thought of antiquity. The man of archaic civilizations and ancient societies was an organic part of the tribal world, the people, the caste or the polis. In all its sensible aspirations the self identifies with the models offered by a certain community. He considers the rule of law as an obvious manifestation of the cosmic order in the world. Consequently, ethics from which he seeks guidance on his activities, helps him acquire virtues and rules of behaviour that make sure he successfully copes with the social roles accessible to him. In this functionally arranged world the purpose of a good life cannot be other than the recognition, sustenance and following of order. The question is not what “I” should do, but what a warrior, a wife, a monarch, a Levite or an Athenian citizen ought to do in the given situation. The significance of individual choice and the alternatives of good and evil are comparatively low, even if there are mutually exclusive, but prevalent liabilities. This is what makes the situation of the Greek tragic hero fateful. Tragic sin is not a crime, it is partly a virtue: it has to do with the hero’s moral commitment at least as much as it is in conflict with this commitment. The sinner is not “responsible” for his sin in the modern sense of the word – the trap is laid by the gods, and the hero
lacks the liberty to avoid falling into it.

However, more or less during the golden age of Greek tragedy and philosophy, we find the first models of anthropocentric ethics in the Eastern Mediterranean: in the Jewish tradition of the Old Testament. Indeed, in the center of human existence here we find human choice together with its good and bad consequences. What is at stake in making decisions is the moral status of the human being. The subject is the man chosen by God (Abraham, Job), and the difficulty presents itself in the autonomy of ethical questioning. That there is a chasm between true knowledge and good deed. While the Greeks are guided by the knowledge of truth along the way to good life, meaning that ethical perspectives vary according to cosmological and epistemological views, the most important documents of Jewish religious thought reveal the recognition of the difference between what is good and what is true. Or, to put it more coarsely, these documents betray an awareness of the irrationality of goodness. It derives from the good God, therefore, the love of God and obedience to God are both superior to truth. Mercy is above justice, faith is above knowledge. This underlying idea of Jewish religious thought is perhaps most vividly expressed by the first lines of Psalm 72:

Give the king thy judgements, O God, and thy righteousness to the king’s son.
He shall judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with justice.
The mountains shall bring peace to the people, and the little hills, by righteousness.

One idea in three different formulations: God stands above righteousness; righteousness is not enough for the poor, only mercy is righteous to them (is not poverty a synonym of the human condition?); peace is greater than righteousness among people, as the mountains are greater than little hills. The Jewish tradition contrasts the order of love to the Greek love of order. But how can God’s infinite goodness be reconciled with human suffering? This is at the center of the story of Job in the Bible – but it gives no explanation. The faith and moral integrity of God’s chosen one are not shaken by the calamities he has to suffer, however, the bet with Satan on Job’s spiritual salvation has two losers, and Satan is only one of them. Job defends his moral dignity – the basis for his chosenness – by insisting on his innocence. He turns against the deity that smote him, and calls his Lord to be witness and judge in this affair. God’s proclamation will justify his innocence, but also leave his question unanswered: what is the sense of unmeasurable suffering brought upon the righteous man? According to the majority of commentators this suffering is the proof of man’s uprightness: that he chooses what is good not out of scheming or for hope of reward, but for itself. This is what makes him deserving of his mission to be an equal partner of his creator in the construction of an ethical universe. This explanation may be true as an explanation, but it cannot be accepted by one who espouses the priority of love over righteousness. The response of love is that I share the suffering of the sufferer. It seems that C.G. Jung was right, when he claimed that God’s response to Job is not found in the Old, but in the New Testament: that God became man and suffered martyrdom for man. (Jung 1973)

One of the most often cited work on environmental ethics, an article by Lynn White Jr. on the historical roots of environmetal crisis was published in 1967, in the renowned journal, Science. White’s starting point is that from among all worldviews, the Christian doctrine, which laid the

---

2 As Gregory Bateson claims, the source of the dividedness for the European spirit is this contrast between the two legacies. How can an expanding world power deal with the ideas of the ethical revolution of a backward and defeated, remote province, he asks. (Bateson 1973)

3 In the words of the Hungarian Jewish theologian, Simon Hevesi who lived a hundred years ago: “suffering is the stylistics of God’s words addressed to the chosen one”. (Hevesi 1943, 152)
foundations of Western civilization, drew the sharpest dividing line between man and nature. Their belief in the immortality of the soul, and in the contrast between the material and the spiritual world, together with the power granted to man by the first book of Moses over all other living beings, authorize Christians to render nature a mere tool in the service of their purposes, denying it any form of self-value. Accordingly, they exploit its resources following the dictates of their interests or fancies. (White 1967) At the same time, White’s critics rightly pointed out that other civilizations have damaged their environment with similar ruthlessness, and what is more, the power of white man did not become a threat to nature because of religious prejudices. (Livingstone 1994) Most of them find the explanation in the extremely effective technological systems capable of large-scale intervention, and in the expansive logic of profit-oriented market economy. The debate acquired a significance reaching beyond itself, inasmuch as it placed man-centeredness in the pivot point of the emerging ecological discourse, which, independently from the relations between the history of religion and technology, proved a watershed in the judgement of ethical concepts relevant to environmental issues.

At the same time everyone agreed that man is at the center of the ethical worldview of modernity – whatever that means. On the one side, we find those who wished to preserve the rich variability of living world in the sole interest of the only moral being: man. Their arguments were in harmony with the concept of modern European ethics. The novelty was that in contrast with the classics, they founded their ethical system not on presumptions related to the divine order of the world or the political order of the city-state, but on their ideas on human nature. However, their critics inspired by the ecological crisis of the second millennium hope to defend and save dying nature by endowing our fellow beings, in David Abram’s words, the “more-than-human world” with an intrinsic ethical value. (Abram 1979) According to them, man is not the sole inhabitant of the ethical universe; he is not even in the center. It is precisely the arbitrary designation of the center that misled our species in defining its existential position and ethical duties. There is a variety of deep ecological trends which share this approach. The bio-egalitarian would extend ethical accountability and the prohibition on causing suffering, even legal capacity to other sensitive living beings, or all living organisms, which though unconsciously, but “strive for their own good in their own way”. The bio-social trend and land ethics argue for the ethical significance of coexistence beyond individual species, which include man. If it is true that morals are nothing but social instincts or learned behaviour, which are responsible for the indispensable self-regulation securing the survival of communities, then this role has to be fulfilled also with regard to ecosystems, “mixed communities” affected by man. Finally, followers of transpersonal ecology and ecofeminists have worked out the strategy of radical identification with other beings. Instead of questioning the unique existential position of man, certain deep ecologists influenced by Buddhism and Hinduism, together with others inspired by the philosophy of phenomenology, have volunteered to reassess his status. According to this, the road of moral evolution leads to the acceptance of the radical alterity of nature, the surrendering of the selfish chauvinism of our species, and to the recognition of our cosmic responsibility. This time I refrain from the brief introduction of these trends. (I attempted it in the prefatory essay of an anthology on Environment and Ethics). (Lányi – Jávor 2005) Instead, I would like to examine the shared presumptions of the followers of deep ecology, or the “real” eco-philosophy a little closer, according to which both what they surpass and what they deny, namely, the ethics of modern European individualism is “anthropocentric”.

4.

The background of the foundations of modern ethics is well-known. The triumph of natural sciences brought about the degradation of the knowledge of the ancients to a heap of confused prejudices and superstitions. Man found himself placed on a remote out-of-the-way satellite, confined lifelong to a biological mechanism, the workings of which was claimed to be identical with that of other mammals. The rise and fall of empires, the utter devastation caused by wars between mercenary
forces, the increasing role of plain and brutal despotism have shattered the belief in the divine source of social order and feudal society. The sacred doctrine of religion itself became the source of infinite discord between denominations trying to destroy each other. The general mood of life in the age was characterized by despair and exaltation. By intellectual awaking indeed, under a collapsing roof at a dark day-break, at the light of blazing fire, to nightmarish experiences. With regard to the real nature of Cartesian doubt, Calderon’s play, Life is a Dream is more informative and profound than the icy intellectual-methodological discussions. It is about awakening from reality which turns out to be a dream. The escape of disillusioned souls to the shelter of the tangible; the struggle for lost certainty, which the pioneers of empirical research attempt to grasp not in the changing human experience, but rather in the coercive power over subdued nature, granted to them by the knowledge of its law, that is, the consistent recourse to scientific methods.  

However, to become power, knowledge had to change, too, and this affected the foundations of ethics most profoundly. Before, knowledge was basically the knowledge of good and evil, but later in the new world of natural sciences a sharp dividing line was inserted between statements about facts and values, between “is” and “ought”. What exists is not good or evil in itself, but necessary: it exists, because it cannot be otherwise. It is measurable with quantitative relations, its law of operation can be fully defined with causal relations verifiable by logical or empirical means, and through the knowledge of the law it can be put into the service of any optional goal, it can be used and used up without restraint. But how do we measure the goodness of objectives? How do we justify the correctness of our actions? Who legislates for the legislative will?

Those who recognized the novelty of the situation from the perspective of moral philosophy, and elaborated the problem for us, are practicing natural scientists and - in their own way – pious souls and more or less loyal subjects. However, quite simply, they could no longer rely on the religious and political presumptions which had made possible the conceptualization of general rules of behaviour and ethical commandments. While in their own way each maintains a new, autonomous legitimacy beyond moral confirmation, in this age scientific worldview, social order and religious belief no longer incline to establish a moral world order. Science insists on the value-neutrality of its laws. The legal system relies on the principle of the political necessity of absolute power. The churches reformed according to the spirit of the age emphasize the inscrutability of God, though at the same time, the meaning of revelation becomes de facto questionable, and, indeed, it is questioned throughout Europe. These changes simply forced ethics to try to stand on its own feet. But those who strived to establish the science of ethics (“more geometrico”) autonomously, did not actually place “man” at the center as a substitute for God, tradition or political community, but rather “law”, in the same sense that contemporary scientific thought sought to trace the workings of nature back to final explanations. While previous ethical systems considered their main objective the analysis of virtues necessary for leading a good life and for actions that appeal to God, modern ethicists have examined whether there is a specific law of human action consequent upon or independent from divine predestination, besides or beyond the laws of nature and social institutions, the following of which can be considered good, its violation a sin.

5.

There seemed to be two solutions. For empirical investigations history and everyday life provided countless examples of the fatally degraded nature of man. It is no coincidence that its deformed, repugnant representations gained a foothold in early modern age. Contemporary political philosophy considered both base and noble emotions of man as power factors, whose source was to be measured by unbiased calculations. The wise prince was to make use of them in his struggle for

---

4 And it was Francis Bacon himself, the first theorist of empiricism, who draws attention to the parallelism between experimental academia and torture, as it is quoted by Fritjof Capra, in his The Turning Point (Capra 1983) 41
power. The scientific method obliged the researcher of the real meaning of human action to take a generally accepted notion of goodness as his starting point, instead of an abstract notion. People in general considered the avoidance of suffering, as well as intellectual and carnal pleasure to be good. They put all their efficiency (power) in the service of obtaining these goods, at each other’s cost, if there interests were at stake. But even if they united or obeyed a common authority, it seemed they do that out of selfishness, too, for the sake of the individual profit expected from cooperation.

Since the objective of scientific knowledge is the understanding of the laws of nature, the science of ethics can have no other objective than the understanding of the laws of human nature. If ethics grounds itself on the natural aspirations of man, and fails to give credit to a concept of the good - which is independent from the former and of absolute value – as a standard, it has no other choice but to admit to the goodness of following these natural, and then, consequently, lawful inclinations. Doing good is equal to serving our interests the best we can. It is bad to suffer restraints. It is good to avoid suffering, if possible, except when we take on suffering for the sake of higher interests or in hope for greater pleasure. We either entrust the weighing of the expected profit and the choice of goals to the natural inclinations of the individual – including, according to some, social instinct or altruism which balances selfishness – or we do not rely on them, and considering the obvious benefit, what is more, the necessity of social interaction, we set a limit to the variety of contradictory individual goals. Instead, we make our choices depending on which brings greater happiness for the greater number. This is the course we should take knowing either that God implanted the laws of human nature in us, or that there is no God, and no superior values, in the name of which we could question the equality of rivaling lifestyles, and impose our moral convictions on others. The elaboration of the naturalist approach lasted for centuries, so here I leave aside the dynamics of its development. I also avoid using the concept of freedom, because its harmonization with natural necessity was accomplished not by naturalist but by rationalist ethics.

This differentiation can only be relative, needless to say, since the examination of human nature aims at understanding a being capable of rational behaviour. Even if we forbear from making a moral obligation of one of the particular convictions of human destiny or of the real nature of man, and set a standard for human behaviour, probably everyone would agree that there are rules for proper cognition, and that these rules can be understood and acquired. Further, it can hardly be questioned that the consideration of these rules should precede the ascertaining of the laws of interaction between rational beings. All other claims may be enforced at the tribunal of the legislative mind. From this evidently follows the first principle of Cartesian ethics: if we want to avoid self-contradiction, we cannot deny anyone the right to use one’s own mind. It is the inalienable, fundamental right of man to take advantage of this capacity, and freely determine the goals of his actions, which is the privilege of conscious being. Freedom is the attribute of thinking, not of being, because thinking is capable of transcending the given reality and questioning it, opting for it or denying it, intending or ignoring it. What are the goals of those who have freed themselves from the bondage of prejudices, of fears, passions and delusions, and are led instead by pure rationality? Their goals will be the perfection inherent in natural laws, says Spinoza, the author of the first great system of rationalist ethics: the peace of this perfection is the greatest happiness for the mind. “Since reason demands nothing contrary to nature, it therefore demands that every man should love himself, should seek his own advantage (I mean his real advantage) […] to sum it all up, that each man, as far as in him lies, endeavour to preserve his own being. […] From this it follows that men who are governed by reason, that is, men who aim at their own advantage under the guidance of reason, seek nothing for themselves that they would not desire for the rest of mankind; and so are just, faithful and honourable.”(Spinoza 1982, Part 4 Proposition 18)

With regard to the present investigations the basic principles of Kantian philosophy can hardly say more. Whose will is determined by universal rationality cannot will anything other than what
anyone else would will in a similar situation in case (s)he is capable of rationally defining the purpose of his/her actions. The maxim of action should work as a principle of universal law (Kant 1983, 30), because whatever (s)he desires (s)he also wishes for other human beings (Spinoza). It follows that who is incapable of this has an evil intent, or at least, a wrong attitude, and therefore, his narrow-mindedness may be curbed in the name of universal reason (the common good). In certain cases (s)he may even be compelled to be free, says Rousseau. For the autonomy of moral choice Kant pays a literally inhuman price. In the definition of the possible goals of good will he has to exclude all kinds of specific goals and interests which constitute the self-identity of the Ego. By their nature, they cannot be generalized. Consequently, in the absence of these determinants, as many have pointed out, Kant’s moral legislator is led only by abstract rationality, an impersonal fulfilment of duties, which aims at the Other only as an occasional representation of the general idea of humanity.

Kant’s grandiose mistake has to do with the concept of autonomy. Ecologists and experts in the theory of living systems have recently agreed that living organisms are capable of autonomous sustenance (of maintaining and renewing their patterns) just because they are not independent of their environment. Instead, they are in active interaction with it, and in the course of this interplay they modify their inner state in response to the environmental challenges. For Kant, this would qualify as a heteronomous behaviour. However, autonomy is not independence, but a type of mutual interdependence, which may or may not be attained within social or/and environmental interaction, and which is not possible, not even theoretically outside them. Clever selfishness and submission to the order of necessity in Spinoza, and obedience to the law of freedom in Kant: the experimental foundation of rationalist ethics produced embarrassing results. Still, the task set for themselves cannot be evaded: in the absence of an ethics which can be rationally understood and exacted, but which respects the freedom of conscience, and is based on solid principles, our value preferences remain unjustifiable, and cannot be defended against the threat of absolute relativism and nihilism. At the same time, we have come to realize that both the mixed texture of desires and passions of human nature, and the laws of reason together with the normative consequences drawn from them are generally inappropriate basis for moral judgement. They could not replace at a satisfactory way divine revelation, the idea of the greatest good, or the “eternal” virtues securing the recognition of the goals of good life. It seems that we have to agree with those who, like Alasdair MacIntyre, concluded that the enlightenment program for the rational foundation of the moral world has failed. Man is the knower of good and evil, but we still have not come closer to understanding where this knowledge comes from. The rationalists clearly saw that they cannot base the doctrine of moral autonomy on individual inclinations most influenced by natural and social constraints. The sensualists clearly saw that the law of freedom cannot be established after the model of physical laws, or deducing it from axiomatic presuppositions according to the rules of mathematical logic. (MacIntyre 1985) Recently, referring to ecological insights, the failure has been attributed to the fact that the Ego was placed in the center of the program: the individual as its own goal and legislator, but no definition of individual goals and duties, and no recognition of the substantial contingency of the human condition could answer the requirements of the task. However, we cannot be sure that this is what really happened. It is possible that it is the question itself, concerning the existence of a moral being, or in other words, the foundations of the moral universe that has not been reassuringly clarified. Perhaps this explains why in the center of the conceptual framework of diverse experiments the Self was replaced by something else: by pleasure, utility and related ideas and emotions in a sensualist or utilitarian way. By necessity in Spinoza, by the concept of humanity in its abstract universality in Kant. Finally, by the yawning gulf of negative freedom in liberalism. The later are the ones who in the 19th century and beyond succeeded to harmonize the variety of individual goals with Kant’s demand for autonomy, in the framework of a political, rather than an
ethical concept. The principle of the independence of individual choice promises an undisturbed possibility of becoming sovereign legislators in our private sphere. If we want to. In any case, it guarantees the “maximum degree of non-interference compatible with the minimum demands of social life”, according to Isaiah Berlin. (Berlin 2002, 207) This is a modest, attractive and still unfeasible program. The independence of individual choice is a nonsense. The majority of choosable goods is indivisible and unenjoyable individually. Moreover, individuals choose each other above all: there is nothing more important for them than their fellows’ approval, understanding, love and agreement with regard to the meaning of action and the value of achievements. Our greatest good is the good itself – and it can only be common. There is no narrow circle of freedom in which we could become independent from each other’s choices. If there were, it would be like a prison for us. Freedom is not a distancing of ourselves from each other, but a relation to others; not an inborn capacity, but a way of association, the only one, actually, worthy of man, and the result of our common efforts.

In fact, this recognition should be the first step in the ethical career of the concept of freedom. Its original – double – meaning was exclusively political. Negative freedom ensures undisturbed conditions for the subject, or exemption from a duty. In contrast, positive freedom is a privilege, an authorization for something. For a long time, ethics could do without this expression. The prerequisite of moral action was named a certain ability (virtue) by the Greeks; Christians attributed it to divine grace. For the idealism of all times, the knowledge of truth made one free, as it is told in the Gospel according to St John. In Kant’s system, freedom is an evident substitute for virtue, but its role ends in enabling man to obey the moral law unconditionally. Then in the end of the 18th century, freedom all of a sudden becomes the governing idea of the age, and remains so for two centuries. It is placed on an ethical pedestal which soon breaks in. Indeed, behind the favourite slogan of emancipation movements, tolerant ethics and avant-garde artists, we find hidden ontological abysses. Martin Heidegger will be the first to descend into them.

6. Among moral thinkers in last centuries there was a silent agreement that conscience and the spiritual phenomena are more or less mysterious functions of a biological organism. The man of positivist anthropology was “created” in the early modern age as a result of a triple reduction. Its steps were: the conceptual separation of the immaterial spirit and the decaying biological mechanism entrusted to its care; the severing of the individual body from the social (mainly for the sake of modesty and hygiene); the degradation of the destiny- and character-shaping scenes of cohabitation into contingent “environment”, together with the relativization of local attachments.

The question of the conscious relation to the external world remained within the competence of epistemology, though it has never been seriously considered in what sense and comparison the world is “external”, to which the subject has access in various ways: he understands, uses, conquers and consumes it. Neither has it been defined where its borders are – the borders of the Ego. This latter question has kept thinkers busy, eg. in the form of primary and secondary qualities, and the differentiation between simple and complex ideas. But in the most original form in Spinoza’s affection-theory, who came to the bold conclusion that “the ideas that we have of external bodies indicate the constitution of our own body more than the nature of external bodies” (Spinoza 1982 Part 2 Proposition 16) Then later, in Proposition 19, the same idea reappears in reverse: “The human mind has no knowledge of the body, nor does it know it to exist, except through ideas of the affections by which the body is affected.”. 5

5 Spinoza forbears drawing radical conclusions from recognizing the equivalence between bodily perception and the perception of the body, exclusively due to his conviction in the existence of an absolute, infinite and perfect being, who guarantees for him the reality of reality. Nevertheless, the discussion of the body-phenomenon in his Ethics seems to lay down the first steps that lead toward Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. The thinkers of the following age, to be sure, did not proceed along these steps.
The intuition of immediate unity between the observer and the observed on the level of perception was alien from the dualism of the dominant epistemological paradigm, which considered the subject-object opposition untranscendable. The ethics of the age could not but adopt this arrangement of the world: the Ego can only be certain of its own existence (though for a long time it will not be able even to question who it is), and faces all others as a lonely, suspicious stranger. The moral philosophy based on the theory of “value-neutral” duties had to face the same unsurmountable hardships as the value system in which the good is a dubious complexity of third-rate qualities. In these cases an actual anthropocentrism could not even occur, since the problematic issue of man’s identity, that is, the need for philosophical anthropology lay dormant for a long time. The center of the system, the place reserved for man was assigned to the biological organism and its needs by the positivists; the abstract subject of the capacity of understanding and willing by the rationalists; and the black box of contingency by the rest of liberals.

The isolation of the individual self from the non-self went so well that eventually, researchers were left with nothing. Neither the objects of experience, nor its media: the senses and the body in general, nor the linguistic structures of thought, the universal norms of cognition, or the acquired legacy of knowledge, the aims of the will, and the unconscious instincts influencing determination can be considered part of the self. Scrupulous analysis proved first of physical then of psychic capacities that they are not identical with the subject of knowledge and resolution. Analytical thinking, tired of the pursuit, did not and could not find something really in-individual in this field, and was mostly prevented only by its positivist prejudices from declaring the existence of an individual self a pure illusion, in the spirit of Buddha’s teachings. Finally, at the end of this hopeless onion peeling – more or less simultaneous with the revolution in theoretical physics – took events a turn in philosophy, too, discovering that the conscious self has nothing of a corpuscle-nature but it has a wave-nature: it only exists in relations and as a relation itself. It was only then, in the 20th century, that anthropocentrism gained a clear conceptual foothold – though not entirely in the spirit of the enlightenment. It became clear that anthropocentric ethics can only be possible, if the ‘Thou’ and not the ‘I’ is placed in its center.

The methodological egoism following the Cartesian premises and the positivism dominating anthropology so far disallowed the thematization of the personal relation between Self and Other (or others) as the basis of ethics. In Kant the determination of the moral position of the co-subject takes place with the intermediating concept of humanity. The methodology by which he deduces our duties is the result of a pure logical process, which does not contain, but on the contrary, which rigorously excludes all personal bearing. Utilitarian and liberal ethics also endorse formal-qualitative relations (greatest happiness for the greatest number, and the maximum freedom for each individual, respectively). Though in these systems the Other is personally involved, the recognition of his moral souvereignty is reduced to negative guidance telling me what to do, since I cannot be sure of what is good for him.

Suppose we asked him! This rather simple solution was to lie dormant for a long time. When it was just about to be considered, forms of so called discursive ethics were elaborated, and in harmony with individualist-rationalist presuppositions, an endless dispute began about the conditions of fair dialogue between opposed needs instead of the foundations of mutual understanding.

However, it is not equity, that the Other needs, but help and devotion. And mutual understanding

6 He who probes most deeply into Western analytical thinking, eventually finds himself in the far East. The Earth is still round.

7 This development was foreshadowed in Habermas by the discussions of G. H. Mead’s communitarian anthropology and by the dialogue with hermeneutic philosophy in his communicative action theory (Habermas 1984, 1987, Mead 1934)
cannot be the outcome of our dialogue, if it was not present among the preconditions of this dialogue as my preliminary engagement to his truth. Understanding is not possible without confidence in the possibility of understanding. The basis of confidence is solidarity. The Other does not just talk to me, but addresses me and expects response, convinced that his concerns are mine, too. In turn, I respond to his urgent request, or evade it – explanations, agreement and disagreement come after. They are nothing but details. This demand for response does not rely on my altruistic instincts shaped by cultural evolution, it is not fair to me, it does not promise reciprocity, and it is not based on what is common in us, because the differences between us are much more important. But how dare you? I have no other choice, he would answer. Man, in order that he should become and remain man, is dependent on the help of his fellow human beings: this is the moment of necessity in our relationship. (S)he asks me, and I answer him/her or deny response; (s)he requests something, and I either meet or deny his request; in other words, I am free. If we had not met, how would I know that I am free? How would I know who I am? I am who is addressed, who responds. I am the responsible subject. If ethics is not the first philosophy, then there is no ethics. In accordance with Emmanuel Levinas, this is the brief summary of a really anthropocentric ethics.\(^8\)

The changing emphasis of ethics, the move from I to Thou, is decisive for environmental ethics, and brings rather favourable consequences. It became clear that man is a being for whom it is good, or even it is the Good to be together with the Other. Not only because we depend on society, but because such is the way we are, that we become someone else in order to be with others and to become somebody for others. Human person is “identical with himself” (this identity is to be understood simply as a moment of recognition: “I recognize him, it’s him!”) insofar as he is capable of transcending his actual conditions and determinants at any time and in any situation – and he is due to act so in a way characteristic exclusively of him. In other words, man remains faithful to himself by taking the other’s side and identifying with him, by taking responsibility for his case – for his truth, welfare, being and for the sustenance of his existence.

Man is never just what he is, but also what he does, knowing that he could choose to act otherwise. Man lives in the world of possibilities which he can compare – find them either good or bad -, choose from, and become aware of the choices he has made. But where does he take that external position from where he observes the vacillations and movements of his own perspective? In a conversational relation he adopts it from others, together with the other’s interpretation of his behaviour.\(^9\) The essence of reflection (self-consciousness) is: seeing myself reflected in the other’s gaze. Indeed, it is through others’ eyes that we find the world beautiful. (Through our companion’s eyes we may even find sometimes ourselves beautiful).

The world of reason received from and shared with others – the world of language – is the ‘environment’ of man. There is a whole world that belongs to his existence, nothing less – this is what his “openness to the world” means. He does not simply “understand” the world, but produces it in a rather practical way, in the sense Merleau-Ponty makes of perception: “The perceived world […] is the ensemble of my body’s routes and not a multitude of spatio-temporal individuals.” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 247). The world that presents itself with the direct experience of one’s activities does not only belong to the Self, but it’s his concern, that is, he is responsible for it. We have come to a radically new concept of anthropocentrism, which identifies the privileged status of man with his responsibility for others. This responsibility is not a consequence and not a postulate of something, but the fact of direct experience. Pain and joy, shame and pride remind us of our responsibility for others’ destinies. “Suffering is the stylistics of God’s words addressed to the

---


9 This significant recognition became widespread in philosophical anthropology through the work of George Herbert Mead Mead Mead 1934)
chosen one”.

In fact, love is not a pious affection, nor an illusion, but a devotion in the strict sense, since man is not an evaluator of the things that are happening but he is the one who makes them happen: he does not merely feel compassion, but partakes in others’ passions. What happens to them is happening to you at the same time. As the Nobel prize winner poet, Salvatore Quasimodo put it:

You betrayed me not, my lord:  
I partook of all the pain  
Being first-born.

The final conclusion of the investigations carried out by moral phenomenology was first explicitly stated by Emmanuel Levinas, namely, that responsibility is the basic ontological characteristic of human condition, thus it precedes ethics and serves as its foundation. This recognition paves the way for the elaboration of a really anthropocentric ethics. It shows that our civilization has been endangered not by having overemphasized, but by having absolutely misunderstood the privileged status of man. The significance of this intuitive turn, as I have tried to show, is evident for ecological ethics.

References

Capra, Fritjof 1983 - “The Turning Point” (London: Fontana Paperbacks)  
Hevesi Sándor 1943 - “On the Book of Job” in Hevesi Ferenc ed. Ancient Jewish Philosophy (Budapest)  
Lányi András, Jávor Benedek eds. 2005 - ”Környezet és etika”/Environment and Ethics, (Budapest, L'Harmattan)  
Livingstone, David N. 1994 - “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis – a Reassessment” (Fides et Historia, Vol.26.)  
MacIntyre, Alasdair 1985 - “After Virtue. A study in moral theory” (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd.)  
Mead, George Herbert 1934 - “Mind, Self, Society” (Chicago: Chicago University Press)  
White, Lynn Jr. 1967 - “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” (Science, vol.155)