

Process Thought and Environmental Ethics
Welt, Umwelt, Mitwelt:

World, Environment, Common World as complex intertwined field of internal relations

As John has already told you, I am enrolled in a Ph.D program in Philosophy in Greifswald, Germany. The field of my research is Umweltethik, that is, environmental ethics. Some German universities like mine have been showing in the last years a growing tendency to move from "environmental ethics" strictly understood towards an "ethics of sustainability". This trend seems to me very important. I believe that it is impossible to deal with the urgent problems of our environment without taking into account since the onset the social as well as the economic aspects.

Since I started working in projects about sustainable development, I have been lamenting the lack of a systematic approach to a theory of sustainability. I have been always convinced that we are fated to repeat the already existing paradigms, if our criticism against them is limited to addressing their concrete effects in our life and behavior. Rather, we must challenge them engaging the battle on the theoretical level, in order to propose alternative worldviews. When I was almost despairing and my search seemed to have no end I happened to encounter Process Thought.

In this paper I will first briefly present to you the context in which I developed the driving questions of my research, i.e. I will tell you about the status of the sustainability discourse in Germany, referring also to some of my experiences in the field. I will then present the main categories of my theoretical project (Welt, Umwelt, Mitwelt as you can see in the subtitle) and finally I will focus my attention on the anthropological and social aspects of sustainability.

In the handout you can find the partition of my lecture as well as the main quotations I refer to.

1. Personal background and context

I. University in Italy

After I completed my master in Philosophy in Italy the professor I worked with asked me whether I wanted to enroll in a Ph.D. program. I was excited by his proposal and answered that,

yes, I would have liked to work on a feminist criticism of the traditional identity-logic. His answer was simply a laugh. He said: *"I was talking very seriously though!"*

That was enough for me to leave the academy altogether, and leave it to the "real" philosophers. I packed my bag with my feminist books and went on to the next phase of my life.

II. The project ELLA - Lüneburg

After moving from Italy to Germany I started working again within a university context. The University of Lüneburg was looking for a coordinator of an international project on sustainable development and local agenda 21-processes. The local agenda 21 has been defined during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro as a set of objectives and activities oriented toward a sustainable development on the global and local level.

In 2000, then, I was hired as the coordinator of the project ELLA, a shorthand for: *Entwicklung und Lernen in lokalen Agenda 21-Prozessen durch europäische grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit*, that is, Development and Learning in Local Agenda 21-processes through international European cooperation. In ELLA we did not only aim, like many other international projects, at a general exchange of information about different approaches in different countries. Rather, we intended to find ways for a better realization of the local agenda 21 – goals on a local level through a wider participation of all relevant stakeholders and of citizens at large in the decision-making process. Four European cities as well as their universities were involved in this project from 2000 to 2004.

The set of measures utilized in many local agenda-21-processes usually tend to address the most pressing issues in the different fields of activity, thus trying to minimize the dramatic impact on nature and on human lives of our unsustainable way of living and producing. Although the minimization of damage is a high priority and sometimes even the only option, it also tends to reduce every action to a mere re-action. Therefore, instead of taking pressing problems as our starting point we in ELLA preferred to focus on potentialities and past positive experiences already present in the weft of the collective life of the four cities participating in the project as well as in their immediate surroundings, in order to show that sustainability is not an absolutely new task, but it is already present in actions and traditional habits as well as in visions and dreams for a better common future. We intended to open up fields of possible alternatives to our usual and mostly non-reflected ways of thinking about environment, society and the economic

system, in order to empower people and encourage them to dare more. In short, we wanted to work on a new (but actually very old) model of living and dwelling on earth that is implicitly critical of the given patterns of the present global economic and social system.

We intended to present our common vision of a sustainable future in a form easy to be understood from everyone and yet not too simplified. In the space of a little more than three years we organized an international itinerant exhibition of sustainable products, services and technologies, with the intent of showing plainly what sustainability could mean concretely in specific regional contexts. Entrepreneurs, local administrations, associations, worker unions, politicians, schools and many citizens worked together with the academic teams of the four universities involved on the selection criteria for the items to be shown in the exhibition: instead of picking up current catalogs of indicators and criteria we opted for a participatory process of discussion and decision-making. Usually enterprises do not have time for general discussion about future, society and ecology; in our case however, given the concrete goal of the exhibition, they kept on working actively in the project and they even discovered that sustainability is a real and meaningful option for them rather than just a dream of a few fanatics. (The results of this process were several:

- Each of the participants achieved better clarity on the meaning of sustainability for him- or herself
- The group as a whole was able to find a common understanding of sustainability and therefore was also able to formulate common tasks and visions for the future
- Last but not least, the participants were empowered in their commitment to those tasks.

"Sustainability" has thus become a well-known term in all the regions involved; especially in Emilia-Romagna local communities use it now as a sort of "quality-label").

III. Local Agenda 21 and sustainability in Germany

The concept of sustainability has been established as a new political paradigm all over the world after the United Nations "Earth Summit" of Rio in 1992, even though we all know that the history of the term is much older; we can at least go back to the World Council of Churches Assembly in Nairobi (1975) to find a first definition of sustainability strongly connected to the aspect of global justice: in his book "Sustainability. Economics, Ecology & Justice" John Cobb adopted the expression "just, participatory and sustainable society".

In my view, this way of understanding the concept is no longer the most widespread (at least in Europe). According to the Rio-formula, sustainability implies a development that guarantees the quality of life for this generation all over the world, while also giving a chance to future generations to shape their own life. According to the United Nations' 1987 Brundtland Commission Report *"Our Common Future"*, sustainability implies a *"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"*. This definition, however, takes for granted the contemporary paradigm of economic growth as the unchallengeable condition for the establishment of welfare all over the world. It is remarkable that in the lapse of time from Nairobi to Rio, Western capitalism has come to be considered the only system that can solve the problems of poverty and resource consumption (Michelsen/ Stoltenberg 1999): a wiser management of resources and a better distribution of wealth, which according to capitalist theories are conceivable goals within the present system, seem enough to bring about a sustainable society.

Sustainable development has to be realized, according to the model of Rio, in three crucial sectors of life: the ecological, the economical, and the social.

Everybody recognizes that these dimensions are interrelated and have always to be considered in their interrelationship. However the weight of each of the three and their mode of relation differ. In many official documents and at times also in the declaration of Rio, the ecological aspect is predominant, and sustainability tends to become just another name for environmental policies.

This narrow understanding of the concept is very widespread. In my opinion it leads to conflicts among different stakeholders and often does not take into account some important aspects, which in the end have a massive influence onto ecological issues: for instance in Europe there are instances of militant environmentalists opposing the demands of unemployed people, instead of working together with them to open a new path. Also, the discussion about genetically modified organisms in Europe has focused mostly on their being a threat for the environment or for human health, while few have pointed out the global injustice implied by the very idea of property rights on the genetic make-up of living beings!

In the late 90s the German Parliament established a Commission, the Enquete-Commission "Protection of Mankind and the Environment", with the task of elaborating proposals for a strategy for a national sustainability. The Commission focused strongly on a more precise description of each dimension (ecological, economic and social), in order to focus on the

particular demands of each one, and offered a normative model for sustainability based on a so-called "three-pillar-model", which attributes an equal weight to each of the dimensions as opposed to the one-pillar-model, which tends to subsume everything under the rubric of ecology¹. As Reinhard Coenen says "socio-economic problems such as extremely high government debts, eroding social security systems and high unemployment can endanger a society just as the overuse of natural resources and environmental deterioration"².

As I implied earlier, I endorse the three-pillar-model. Moreover I claim that a systematic theory of sustainability is needed, and that it is the only way to achieve a more fundamental connection among the three dimensions. Therefore, the switch from a narrow concept of environmental ethics to a broader concept of ethics for sustainability is presupposed by my work.

In the remainder of this paper I will focus on the relevant problems that one encounters in the elaboration of a theory grounding an ethics for sustainability and I will pay a particular attention to the social and anthropological aspects of this task.

2. Relevant issues for a philosophical approach

I see at least three major issues emerging from the public discourse, both academic and non-academic:

I. Negotiation among the dimensions

Given the difficult task of interconnecting the three dimensions mentioned, many experts argue that the only practicable way is a steady effort in balancing and finding satisfactory compromises by negotiation among the demands coming from the different dimensions. Some scholars however maintain not only that the interconnection of the three dimensions is difficult but that a general theory of sustainability is impossible in principle. I am thinking here especially of the Institute for Social Research established by the German Worker-Union-Confederation, one of the heir of the Frankfurt School.

These assumptions rest on the conviction that the main characteristic of the modern world is a finally achieved emancipation of man from nature and therefore that economic and social field on one side and ecological field on the other are essentially distinct. This standpoint is

¹ It is a question of a holistic approach to "emphasize explicitly the durable cross-linking of economic production and social compensation processes with the load-bearing capacity of the ecological systems. This strategy of total cross-linking was described by the Council of Experts for Environmental Problems in Germany (SRU 1994) as the 'reticulate principle' (taken from the Latin rete=net)" (Kolloge 1997, p. 11).

² From: Reinhard Coenen: "Contribution to the ESTO-Study, "National and Regional Programs and Strategies for Sustainable Development", Karlsruhe 2000

currently very widespread in Europe and especially in Germany. Even the Enquete-Kommission itself neither presupposes nor proposes a systematic theory of sustainability.

II. Language-based versus nature-based ethics

Today in Germany two main discordant approaches are employed within the debate about environmental ethics: the "sprachfundiert" (based on language) and the "naturfundiert" (based on nature).

- Some philosophers refer to Habermas' theory of "communicative action" and claim that ethics does not need any ontological or cosmological foundation. Ethics is derived from the Kantian conviction of a *transcendentally* universal rationality common to all human beings, who would all potentially agree on universal moral principles, when presented through valid rational arguments. Moreover, moral obligation arises only in the context of human communication, and it applies directly only to other moral beings, that is, to humans. Other beings ought to be taken in consideration, in spite of their lack of morality and value, because of the value that humans ascribe them.

- Other philosophers, fewer in number, like for instance Meyer-Abich, endorse a so-called biocentric or physiocentric outlook. According to this approach, ethics is grounded on a peculiar understanding of nature that runs a risk opposite to Habermas' , that is, of considering more important the "low" organisms, which are appropriately regarded as the base for any ecosystem, than higher or more complex organisms like animals or humans. The fact that nature has value in itself is worked out in a way that makes humans just members of it, attributing them little relevance. In the most radical positions humans are considered a curse for nature.

Each of these positions emphasizes one pole of the tension humans vs. nature. By doing so, they are both led to conceive of the relation human-nature as an alternative among the poles of which a choice has to be taken.

III. Low consideration and elaboration of the social dimension

The social dimension of sustainability has been by and large the less considered. Little has been done in recent years, at least in Germany, to work on a more precise description of this dimension. Most scholars as well as local authorities tend to take for granted the established definitions of the social dimension, without addressing the topic in a new way as required when sustainability is adopted as the background. In practice, three assumptions are left unchallenged:

- First, nature is not a constituent of human societies and it is not something be respected for its own sake;
- Second, human beings are autonomous independent individuals, in the sense uphold by modern liberalism, and broadly utilized in capitalism
- Third, economic growth is a necessary condition for the establishment of social justice at the local, national, and global level.

(However, some well-respected scholars have already realized that the above three assumptions are extremely problematic. Within this group Stoltenberg and Michelsen have also underlined the lack of consideration for essential aspects of human life, like the regional rootedness, or the preservation of traditional ways of living (in terms of preparation of food, techniques of building, traditional professions, religious and social rituals, and so on). Therefore they add to the three dimensions a fourth one, which they named cultural, in which items like lifestyles, values, science and research, education are included (Stoltenberg/ Michelsen 1999). I agree that these cultural aspects must be addressed in the context of the debate on sustainability, but I believe that they have to be integrated into the social dimension rather than become an additional one. Indeed, it is necessary to develop a wider conception of the social dimension, which has to be fundamentally different from the concept of society as the place of merely "material relations" based on economic factors, as assumed both in the capitalistic and in the Marxist views).

3. The social dimension as the crucial knot for a systematic theory of sustainability

I. Welt: The world as a human creation

Let me begin the theoretical part of my paper with a quotation from Hans-Georg Gadamer: "It is thus clear that man (*der Mensch*), unlike all other living creatures, has a "world", for other creatures do not in the same sense have a relationship to the world, but are, as it were, embedded in their environment (...) Moreover, unlike all other living creatures, man's relationship to the world is characterized by *freedom from environment*. This freedom implies the linguistic constitution of the world" (T&M): with these words Gadamer brilliantly formulates the core idea of the modern dualistic paradigm: unlike animals and other beings, humans are not determined by their environment and constitute their own world by means of language. The world is thus the place of a self-realization without embedment. Since the world comes into being

through the linguistic activity of humans, it represents the only common ground of relatedness and communication among them. Therefore there is no common background of relations before culture and before human activity.

Addressing with amazing sharpness the same issue, Hannah Arendt maintains that the modern condition of man is essentially characterized by "world alienation". In order to show the radical solipsistic condition of the subject in the modern world she refers to Whitehead and quotes a passage from *The Concept of Nature*, in which Whitehead asserts that modern reason is completely based "on the implicit assumption that mind can only know that which it has itself produced and retains in some sense within itself" (Whitehead quoted by Hannah Arendt, p.283). Quoting Whitehead again a few lines further, she defines this theory "the outcome of common-sense in retreat": the common sense presupposes a common world previous to the perception and representation of it within the mind. Arendt implies that before modernity, common sense used to precede the other senses and gave them a common root and environment beyond differences of expressions, activities and experiences. On the contrary in the post-cartesian tradition common sense has become a mere "inner faculty without any world relationship (...). This sense now was called common merely because it happened to be common to all. What men now have in common is not the world but the structure of their minds, and this they cannot have in common, strictly speaking; their faculty of reasoning can only happen to be the same in everybody." (283). The only chance to still have a common ground is now the very idea of a universal unchangeable rational mind, the same in everyone, the principle of truth and good, the unity of measure of any relation. The only possible "commonality" is therefore in front of us as a task that must be entirely constructed by us.

The common world as a human construction is an idea that has taken many forms in the history of modern tradition. The most evident of these forms, besides the stress on language typical of the contemporary period, is the ideal of labor as the place of self-realization. Capitalism is rooted in this assumption. Hannah Arendt provides again a very interesting description of the essence of capitalism in the modern world: "The greatness of Max Weber's discovery about the origins of capitalism lay precisely in his demonstration that an enormous, strictly mundane activity is possible without any care for or enjoyment of the world whatever, an activity whose deepest motivation, on the contrary, is worry and care about the self. World alienation, and not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age (...). The process of

wealth accumulation, as we know it, stimulated by the life process and in turn stimulating human life, is possible only if the world and the very worldliness of man are sacrificed" (254).

Since the only common world is a *to-be-established one*, labor has been interpreted as similar to a *creatio ex nihilo*. Although human beings do not have the possibility of create something out of absolute nothing, they can give a shape to matter. The modern concept of matter is the closest thing to a "nothing" that we can imagine: it is bare, dead, without any value in itself and completely devoid of experience or activity whatsoever. It is man who adds value to matter with his work. Both Capitalism and Marxism have taken this concept for granted. Our economic system is entirely grounded on it, as Herman Daly has pointed out very clearly: "That to which value is added is [said to be] inert, undifferentiated, interchangeable, and superabundant – very dull stuff indeed, compared to the value-adding agents of labor, with all its human capacities, and capital, which embodies the marvel of human knowledge" (Beyond Growth 63). Since matter is considered as indefinitely at our disposal, strictly speaking there is only consumption of the added-value, of the product of labor. The world before labor and production is thus considered a mere "externality" by mainstream economic theories.

In a similar way the so-called reproductive work, usually carried out by women within Western societies, like raising children, taking care of elderly relatives or neighbors, looking after the household etc., has always been considered by the productive system of capitalism as an "externality" (Hofmeister). Both nature and reproductive work had always played the role of source and gutter for productive activities: as such they both have always been taken for granted and considered indefinitely present. As German feminists pointed out, the very concept of work and production must be challenged in order to realize a more sustainable society.

II. Umwelt: The environment as a world-with

When the commonality of the world is confined to the universal human reason and its products, relations in general are seen as external and not constitutive. Relations do neither precede nor cause in any sense the emerging of the subject. Relationality itself seems to be considered an externality to the life of modern people. This conviction has its roots in modern dualism and rests on the illusion of an independent subject considered like the traditional substance without embedment.

The reality of the world as production, either of material things or ideas, is a fact. I would go as far as to affirm with Gadamer that human beings, unlike other living creatures, create their

"world" of material and spiritual culture. The problem arises when this "world" is conceived as created out of nothing, that is, is considered as not embedded in the natural world. Whitehead's metaphysics provides the basis for a different worldview, which is centered in the conception of internal relations as intimately constitutive of every entity. This standpoint has been widely and successfully utilized for the formulation of radically new positions in environmental ethics. Indeed it offers a new outlook on nature by means of the idea of the intrinsic value of all creatures in different degrees. The modern paradigm of interaction with nature, which has been mostly damaging, has thus been challenged. The environment (Umwelt), as internally related to human beings, becomes, according to this conception, a Mitwelt, a world-with rather than just a world around us.

John Cobb, Charles Birch, and Herman Daly have made a crucial contribution to this topic. In my work I will build upon their economic and ecological theories, which, I think, bear special significance in my own context, given the unfortunate paucity of process thought's influence in Europe at the present time. Since I am reading this paper today to you in Claremont, there is obviously no point for me to dwell on this topic, and I refer you to their works for a detailed exposition of the argument.

III. Mitwelt: rethinking communities in a feminist perspective

I believe that the challenge brought by process thought upon our present destructive behavior against nature and the current theories of environmental ethics is momentous. But I am also convinced that the first task imposed on us by the urgency of the ecological crisis is rethinking our social togetherness, our being (or not) in community.

It is indeed in the community that we are first confronted with relatedness and autonomy. As long as the societies, in which we live, reiterate (and expect us to reiterate) the modern paradigm of individual freedom, as opposed to solidarity and communion, we are not going even to understand the meaning of the intrinsic relatedness to nature and environment. For example, if our conception of modern society is grounded on general and universal principles of equality, and our daily life is even more influenced by homogeneous ideals, it is extremely difficult to conceive the importance of issues like biodiversity in nature. If we do not have the courage for difference and the acknowledgment of constitutive relations within our human society, which is our closest environment, how can we imagine to be open for them in the wider context of the natural world?

The society is the place where we learn the meaning of a common world, a world-with (Mitwelt), which we help to shape. Therefore, I argue that the crucial knot on the way towards a sustainable development is the reshaping of some aspects of the core structure of Western societies.

As Catherine Keller has pointed out in "Apocalypse Now And Then", the two main contemporary theories of societies, the liberal and the communitarian, have both a tendency to deny differences and thus the possibility for a real pluralism: "Current discourses tends to leave no third option between the either/or of a "return" to a unifying community or the ongoing advance into a fragmenting individualism" (Keller 1996). Between the hypostasis of a free and independent self and the dissolution of any identity into group sameness there is still the option of a real pluralistic society, where variety and difference are possible, while the risk of an absolute differing or even of indifference is avoided.

The struggle for difference against the model of justice as mere equality has been carried out by many feminist thinkers especially in Italy and France. Adriana Cavarero and Maria Luisa Boccia (two Italian feminists interpreters of Hannah Arendt) affirm that the statement "all men are equal" leads to the statement "all men have equal rights": the unity of measurement for equality implied here is therefore the category "man". In our tradition this corresponds in fact to the white, Western, middleclass, adult male, implicitly acknowledged as the paradigmatic example of a rational being. This implies that, in order to have equal rights it is necessary to become "equal" to the measure, i.e. to become like a (white, Western, middleclass) man. Through their struggle for emancipation, women can therefore become "equal" and achieve the same rights as MEN, but in doing so they have to renounce their distinctiveness. The seeming creation of equality turns out to be in fact a process of homogenization.

Deconstructive postmodern thinkers, including many feminists, have addressed their sharp criticism against the very idea of subject as a permanent and unchangeable unity and have refused therefore any metaphysical claims, *as* they perceive them to be grounded in this conception of the subject. As Jane Flax points out: "Postmodernists wish to destroy all essentialist conceptions of human being or nature" included the very idea of the subject as such: "the subject is merely another position in language"³. The refusal of the modern subject leads thus to a dropping of the subject altogether and with it, I argue, of any possibility of unification,

³ Jane Flax: *Thinking Fragments* Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West (University of California Press, Berkeley 1990).

abstraction and, in the end, real relation between the so posited differences: the fragments resulting from the dissolution of the subject as unifying principle remain separated (the only possible connection being given by the language or the text intended as texture) and are, not less than the modern subject itself, locked monads without internal relations. Differences seem to be absolute and thus reciprocally indifferent.

On the contrary, as Whitehead writes, "the differences arising from diversities are not absolute. Analogies survive amid diversity (...). The peculiarities of the individual are reflected in the peculiarities of the common process which is their interconnection". A real pluralistic society is one in which differences have a real possibility of existence and development, without risking either inclusion and absorption within a superior "equal" unity, or the absolutization of their respective standpoints⁴. Thus, this imaged society provides the possibility for the thriving of "singularities."

Adriana Cavarero claims that the tradition of Western philosophy tried to think singularity and always failed. Singularity cannot be, according to Cavarero, an object for philosophy, since singularity manifests itself only in the interwoven narrative history of a single person and is not reducible to the general categories describing that one single person (the "whats", like age, sex, nationality, ethnicity, profession and so on). She argues that this is exactly what philosophy has been all about: defining a subject only by means of universal categories. Considering the "what" as the only defining factors for one's own identity leads to either a reciprocal exclusion, or a hierarchical order among the categories, since they are not open or permeable. To posit a subject as equal to any "what" means to close the possibility of internal difference, multiplicity and creativity, i.e. in the end to posit the subject as equal to the object, reducing it to a thing.

Adriana Cavarero has developed her conception of singularity by analyzing the structure of Italian feminism in the 70s and by taking on Hannah Arendt's distinction between the "who" and the "what". In Italy during the 70s women started to meet with other women in small groups with the goal of describing themselves apart from the definitions provided by men. Instead of tracing a description of what is "a woman" as distinct from what is "a man," they began to narrate to each other their own stories. In doing so, they focused on the many differences among themselves and avoided the path of positing a new universal against the old one.

⁴ "A radical relationism begins where mere celebration of difference breaks down" (Keller PD)

Thus, in telling one's own story the identity emerged as an on-going web of relations, held together by the continuity of the story itself from the provisionally final point of view of the storyteller at that very moment. The "who" arises as an intertwined texture of different experiences, universals and categories (the "whats"), which are embedded in the precedent experienced world, common to others, but connected in an absolutely unique and unrepeatable way. The "who" is the singularity as the locus where differences and analogies as well as common experiences become manifest in their relational uniqueness. A single subject comes into being as a result of her own narrative history only and exclusively at each moment.

Moreover, by stressing the constitutive necessity of relationality, Cavarero argues that nobody can tell her own story alone, nobody can simply see and present her own identity to others. Everyone receives her own story, her own identity, through the storytelling of others. Outside of relations there is no identity, not even for oneself. Cavarero explains this, recalling the well-known myth of Oedipus, of which she offers an interesting and original interpretation. Oedipus defeats the sphinx, who is a dreadful threat for the city of Thebes, by answering correctly her terrible riddle: "What is that being that has four legs at the beginning, two in the middle and three in the end?". The answer being "the man". In Cavarero's rewriting of the myth (inspired by scenes painted on an ancient vase), Oedipus doesn't really reply to the question. Instead, he answers it by pointing his finger to himself. According to Cavarero in doing so Oedipus defines himself as the universal "what" and therefore wastes the chance of knowing himself as the concrete story of his own life, he loses for his singularity the chance to be. Self-confident, because assured about his own identity by his victory against the sphinx, he doesn't even engage into a search for "who" he really is. He is the hero of the city and does not need any further relation to his past. In a similar way Catherine Keller describes the figure of the Hero as the "separate self": the hero cuts off all relations, especially the relation of origin, he is just because he is (like the idea of independent substance in modern thought). Relations are just external to him and do not determine in any way his settled identity. He is the winner, the one who never relates to others but for destroying or enslaving them and remains always just WHAT he is. His sword is always clean and shimmering; it is made in order to do clean cuts without even getting dirty or looking damaged. This is the image of the modern subject as the universal, unchangeable, self-determining actor as opposite to the world.

Keller goes further than Cavarero outlining also the counter position to that, i.e. the soluble self, which has been traditionally imposed onto women. The soluble self has no kind of

stability. She does not weave her own web to intertwine the different threads constituting herself. Rather, she tends to weave the web of others, just like Penelope for Odysseus. This is the position of the absolutely particular, lost in the multiplicity of the world, never for herself, but always mirroring others, being inherent to others; since she is not an enduring independent substance like the "hero" seems to be, she is excluded from any possibility of unification and self-relation, even in a provisional and open form.

Keller points out the risk of relationality without *relata*. Dissolution is the result. This risk is increased in deconstructive postmodernism. As Keller says: "The play of difference as such does not take account of the objectifications of the other in us and of us in the other. It may find itself in a new kind of closure, enmeshed in network, however fluidly enunciated, of mutually exclusive impermeabilities, of opaque incommensurabilities strictly bounded by human language. This is where relativism and relationalism part company – there where relativism freezes into a deconstructive undecidability"⁵.

Thus, Catherine Keller opens the path for the development of a philosophy of singularity (as a reply to Cavarero's postulated impracticability) based on Whitehead's metaphysic. Since each actual entity is an absolute and unrepeatable singularity, constituted by the uniqueness of the connection among its prehensions, a real pluralism does not imply any interchangeability between entities, as it is the case in pluralistic materialism. Moreover, the relations among entities, rather than being just weak traces, constantly in danger of fading away, constitute each entity *internally* by causal efficacy. The differences in their infinite multiplicity are by no means indifferent. Rather, singularities are internally interconnected and through relevance and elimination they are intensely engaged in contrasts as well as similarities. Constitutive relatedness and novelty are not opposites, but reciprocal conditions.

Conclusions:

In this paper I have invited you to a journey through the three dimensions of sustainability, hinting at the fact that Process Thought can provide the philosophical background for a systematic theory of sustainability, which neither reiterates the modern dualistic paradigm, nor remains caught in the fragmentation of deconstructive postmodernism.

⁵ Catherine Keller, "Process and Chaosmos – the Whiteheadian Fold in the Discourse of Difference", in "Process and Difference (State University of New York 2002)

I agree with those who stress the dramatic urgency of ecological issues and the necessity of addressing them without any delay, as well as with those who point out the pressing problem of global justice and work actively for a global political turnover. My concern is by no means inconsistent with both. On the contrary, I firmly believe that a drastic change in our way of being in community opens the path to a fundamental modification of our relating to nature and production. However, this change requires a new radical worldview, centered on the idea of relationality as constitutive of our dwelling on earth.

Solidarity and respect for nature are not to be considered as a limitation of our freedom and creativity. Instead, it is only through our being rooted in the common world preceding and accompanying us that we can shape new patterns without destroying, rephrasing Whitehead, the safety of the organism on which we depend (PR 107: canalization). The conception of a common world preceding and co-causing our self-constitution is not in contradiction with the idea of our construction of a common world in the language or through work and activity: quoting Keller, this world is "... a cosmos open to our construction precisely because it constructs us with the capacity to imagine it back to itself new. Only as worlded in such a cosmos can we imagine our differences as grounded in a common matrix of preconditions, and so yearning for a future common good" (PD). The concept of "common good" intended here is different from the idea of the lowest common denominator resulting by the subsumption of differences into a higher unity. Rather, this concept takes into account very seriously the postmodern criticisms against universal claims as well as the feminist need of a deeper consideration of difference and singularity. Within a radically pluralistic society, where singularities dwell in their multicolored interconnections, difference and commonality are two faces of the same coin.

END

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