

Living in the World as Humans

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There is nothing that is less obvious than what it is to be a ‘human person’. Yet, we could firmly assert that human beings are not an artificial creation nor are they genetically modified organisms, but rather bodies which share in life with plants and animals and which possess in themselves alone certain characteristics such as language and the capacity for thought which provide the freedom to attain knowledge, to project and realize intentions, to act upon the world. Added to which it is in how they inhabit that world that men and women reveal themselves as human, or conversely, as inhuman. They do not, from an imaginary point of view as artists and poets, inhabit an Earth without borders where all mankind lives together in peace. Humans, with male and female following their own particular paths, behave rather as predators and conquerors, excluding from their midst other humans who are cast out on to the world’s margins. They behave according to norms specific to their group which modulate according to situation the notions of humanity itself and of who and what a human person is. The question which remains unanswered, then, is whether it is possible to derive a universal ethic which is valid for all, whatever one’s distinct culture might be.

Mundus and cosmos

The Latin word *mundus* and the Greek-derived *cosmos* denote both the world (Fr. *monde*) constructed by our science, arts, and knowledge and the real world in which we move about. No human activity takes place outside of the ‘world’ in some form, be it the occupation of a territory (in the geographical world), the construction of a house (for the domestic world), or artistic creation (in the aesthetic world). Yet the origin of the Latin *mundus* already suggested exclusion and inequality among humans. Etymologically speaking, *mundus* referred to the heavens perceived as a harmonious whole, but also to the inhabited Earth, which hence already carried the sense of a dwelling-place for man. *Mundus* thus indicated on the one hand a physical, geographical reality, but also, when used adjectivally, the quality of an object that was ‘clean’, ‘nice’, ‘neat’, ‘elegant’ (Lewis & Short Latin–English Dictionary, 1879, rev. 2009). It relates to a whole series of words in the lexical field of order and beauty, ultimately deriving from the Sanskrit *mund*, meaning ‘to be purified’. So does the *mundus*-world then imply the habitable Earth in which undesirables do not have right of residence? Indeed it is the most harmless-looking words that may lead us to the idea of evil as the moral, physical, psychological, economic, or political violence that humans are

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capable of inflicting on their fellows. *Mundus* also makes the association with the cataclysmic or catastrophic kind of violence which escapes any control by man, since the inhabitable world is also that of 'nature', a world which we can re-create but which we cannot master. We have not become, as Descartes thought, the 'masters and possessors of nature'. So is there any possibility of a universal ethic which might allow the planet as a human dwelling-place to be saved? Human activities with little respect for the conservation of the environment constitute aggravating circumstances in its degradation, as the 1987 United Nations Brundtland Report showed. Today, neither the sky nor the earth presents for us the order, harmony, and beauty implicit in the etymology of *mundus*, as also in that of the Greek *cosmos*. The world of the twenty-first century remains that physical and political space where evil occurs in the form of events whose consequences are incalculable.

If we track how the word *cosmos* is used by a number of Greek philosophers, we find that the model of order and beauty encompassed by this word is the natural order of the heavens; the world considered the most beautiful was not that of the inhabited earth. The ideas of exclusion and inclusion are found in Plato and Aristotle. In the city, through law, a certain political and social order was installed in which inequalities appeared natural. In Plato, as early as Book II of the *Republic* where the philosopher is speaking of the city of needs, the artisan and the husbandman, who undertake manual work, are ranked at the bottom of the social scale. At the top rung is found the philosopher who engages in a long period of scholarly training, since he must be knowledgeable in the arts of humanity before becoming a fully accomplished philosopher ready to take part in political life. These human arts relate primarily to the development of moral aptitudes as well as to adaptation to the life of the society. Through this he shows that he is skilled in discerning right from wrong, in knowing himself, in caring for his soul and, if need be, in providing just government for the city. If occasion requires, he will become the advisor of a ruler, as set out in the *Politics*. The free man, imagined as a microcosm governed by an enlightened mind, must, through following a purposeful education, watch over the good order of his faculties: thought must control desire, reining in the imagination and the feelings if need be. Morally, the free man is just, has had a sound moral upbringing, and is knowledgeable in all things, strongly rooted in his own society, enjoying the harmony of all the virtues which go towards his make-up. Man is thus truly a *cosmos* when he openly manifests all his aptitudes. He represents the world's order in miniature. But does *every man* deserve to be so named *man*?

As a citizen, his local world is the city whose habitation he shares with other citizens and free men, but also with slaves and resident aliens. In the city, *women*, both for Aristotle as for Plato, are not considered as *people*. Apart from in exceptional circumstances, they are excluded from public affairs. The world of women relates first and foremost to the order of women's quarters. In Aristotle's view, nature commands and the legislator obeys, while the role of the philosopher is to justify and reinforce the inequality of the social order. In fourth century BCE Athens, slaves were regarded by Aristotle in Book I of the *Politics* as 'living instruments' in the service of the household economy. The slave does not make any *rational* choices and he does not participate in public affairs. The world conceived in terms of balance, order, and beauty (*cosmos*) thus embraces a principle of political and social inclusion and exclusion.

Much later in human history, the slave snatched out of Africa and flung into the hold of a ship did not have choice either, whether rational or otherwise. He had a sturdy body which seemed fashioned for labour. But was he a *man*? Multiple examples could be adduced to show that in certain circumstances the idea of a common world or a common humanity does not extend to all human beings. There is no *cohabitation* of all humans. In the real world, man tends to dehumanize his fellow human. Because of this, the universal norm for a peaceful and happy cohabitation remains undiscoverable. Nevertheless, it is in resistance to oppression and dehumanization that the individual and the group restore their *humanity*, by seeking to inhabit differently that world from which they are excluded.

Remaining human while living ‘nowhere’

The notions of habitation and exclusion take on quite different shapes when one tries to consider them with reference to the diverse manifestations of contemporary migration. How does a person migrate both spatially and mentally? What are the laws that illuminate the paths trodden by men, women, and children sometimes without forethought because in fact they have no choice in the matter?

The wars which have plagued the twentieth and twenty-first centuries together with other emergency situations such as natural disasters reveal just how much human beings do not cohabit together in peace, as one might in one’s own environment, enjoying complete freedom and tranquillity, respecting the laws of one’s country and fulfilling one’s civic duties. Some, and they are getting more and more numerous, do not have the freedom to choose their place of residence. They thus come up against the laws of the *nowhere*. If the world, in its diversity and complexity, is turned periodically into chaos, separating humans one from another, subjecting bodies, minds, and hearts to grievous testing, we need to rethink the condition of men and women in terms of new possibilities for inhabiting uninhabitable spaces.

Inhabiting does not mean being rooted somewhere, like a plant, being fixed on the Earth (Heidegger, 1958), having a dwelling-place somewhere. In emergency situations, it means being in a state of mobility where one must learn to exist in *nowhere*, in a place where life must be begun again from zero, confronting the emptiness of an inhospitable space to transform it into a place where one feels comfortable. The types of emergency that drive humans out of their native places include wars but also exceptional states like poverty, along with natural catastrophes or those caused totally and absolutely by human activities.

Certain literary texts may be cited which relate how men and women, shut out from the well-ordered ‘proper world’ governed by social rules and moral values, derive a new form of habitation, managing through necessity to construct other worlds out of improbable places which they render habitable. Paradoxically, it is not a matter of clandestinely occupying a place of neatness and order. The garbage dump, symbolically the diametric opposite of the idea of ‘world’, is the space which is transformed into a place of habitation, with its rules of community life. The novel *Quand l’ail se frotte à l’encens* [When Garlic Rubs Up Against Incense] (Ba Konaré, 2006) recounts the daily life of a poor Malian family, living in Bamako on the discarded trash of the consumer society. We can also mention *L’Olympe des infortunés* [The Olympus of the Wretched] (Khadra, 2010) whose characters are camped on a no-man’s land between a public rubbish dump and the sea. Excluded from society, they nevertheless retain their personal dignity, and talk about it: ‘When you’re done like a rat, you don’t talk yourself down. It’s a question of personal dignity’ (Khadra, 2010: 12). They dream, they try things out, they think, they play music. Everything happens as if they are part of a new family.

However much each society may allow itself to ignore those living on its margins, the latter will go on creating their own worlds on the edge of the habitable world. In the same way, refugees and stateless and displaced people transform their *nowhere* into a space for living at the whim of events and cycles of violence. For life is an eternal rebeginning despite the omnipresence of death and the vast array of challenges to be confronted. From day to day, those indwelt by the *nowhere* carry with them their symbolic baggage, their essence of humanity: a few shards of worlds now past or slender traces of past knowledge, of languages or beliefs mixed with other bits and pieces picked up along the way. In this way *composite* cultures are born in contrast to the *atavistic* cultures, as discussed by Caribbean social philosopher Édouard Glissant throughout his work. The holds of the ships and the plantations of the slave trade, he says, were places where such creolized cultures emerged, cultures that were not exclusive but related different worlds to each other.

In the twenty-first century, we might wonder who are the contemporary *nowhere* dwellers, how far they are accepted or rejected, down-trodden, crushed underfoot, living on the threshold of

humanity. They are up against the laws of a now global world, their lives often governed by so-called humanitarian laws covering the condition of creatures of flesh and blood who have slipped from being regarded as having fully human status. There are several categories of *nowhere* and an infinite number of ways of falling away from the human condition. The most common way often takes place before our very eyes, as related by the Congolese novelist Sony Labou Tansi in *L'Anté-peuple* (1983), who presents as one of his characters Dadou, a stolid, upright citizen who becomes an alcoholic from the moment he meets one of his students, which brings about a scandal and precipitates Dadou's descent into hell. After a time he decides to pull himself together (does he really have any choice?) to rediscover a life markedly different from that which he had led before. His place in the world that he had inhabited for so long has been erased. He goes back to the jungle, a place of regeneration but also of revolt and transformation. He gets others to think he is 'crazy'. A story that is not really as banal as it might appear, for 'resistance' is not what one might think. It is not just refusing to be the passive victim of a circumstance, but being capable of being responsible, that is of taking the initiative and ordering one's life differently when one has no choice.

Today, each localised 'world', each city, each country shapes its own boundaries (Agier, 2002). The global world too has its margins where fragments of isolated worlds persist, whereas societies, whatever their nature, generate exclusion which is sometimes invisible. Ben Okri's luminous tale, *Étonner les Dieux* [Amazing the Gods] (1998) relates this admirably. It tells the story of a certain invisible man who, once grown up, decides to travel round the real world to discover people who are visible and who genuinely exist. In seven years of journeying he comes across surprise after surprise, since a quest in search of knowledge about the world is no doubt ultimately an internal one, a quest for knowledge of self.

We could also mention what might be called the creation of zombies. In some countries, the holders of political power, in order to realize their ends of winning or retaining absolute control, maintain a climate of subtle unobtrusive terror which becomes so everyday that people are little by little turned into formless shadows, stripped of any will, putting up with unheard of forms of violence. But such zombies are *unkillable*; as the saying goes that does the rounds in the streets of Abidjan: 'A dead goat doesn't fear the knife'.

Real and virtual worlds

From a different point of view, along with globalization the virtual world is now an integral part of our daily life and is tending also to become a place of habitation, as is demonstrated by the ever-increasing range of social networks on the Internet. Is it then pure chance that we use the expression the 'worldwide web'? We could go on at some length on the globalization of networks and its consequences in terms of inclusion and exclusion, of opportunities opened up or closed off, of acceptance or rejection of the other. But who indeed is this 'other' human, at once so close and yet so distant from us at a time when international news is broadcast in real time and when new media come to occupy centre stage as the privileged tools of human relationship? At times, upon this worldwide web, the other has neither a shape nor a face. At times he might wear the mask or balaclava of a serial killer or hostage-taker, beneath which he could be that angel-faced neighbour who is surely above all suspicion. Taking one's fellows hostage without qualm seems to be child's play, since anything can happen, whether motivated by rational thinking or the most murderous of ideologies, whether under the cover of a mask or with a pure and open face. One need think only of the huge expansion of cyber-criminality to be aware of this. Where money is conceived as the cardinal virtue, a world unmoderated by scruple is easily built in which utilitarianism reigns supreme. This type of world is one whose rules are scornful of any prevailing morality. The new information and communication technologies are taken aboard by faceless and shapeless people,

seemingly unreal, who go under pseudonyms to better fleece others on a grand scale. Thus it is that in the global world new and unlimited forms of violence are being created, associated with the new ways that the space of the virtual world may be inhabited.

But on the other hand if we envisage these new forms of habitation as potentially playful, then the global web could be the place of experimentation for new types of solitude amidst one's crowd of 'friends' or 'followers'. For there is very little lacking in these new places of habitation in the virtual world – though still out of step with the real world – to establish a link with the idea of *humanity*, the word that designates that ungraspable essence which properly characterizes us: the sense of sociability (Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 2). Man is neither god nor beast: the proof is that we live naturally in community, as Aristotle emphasizes.

My impression is therefore, however paradoxical it may seem, that social networks are also places of inclusion as of exclusion: inclusion according to affinities of choice and exclusion according to the laws of network formation which imply co-optation, acceptance, protection, or rejection. Myriam Revault d'Allonnes (1999: 15) asserts that

[...] the world becomes inhuman or acosmic when the delicate mesh of relationships which men have woven becomes unravelled, when the timespan within which they undertake their infinite conversations becomes attenuated and when there no longer remains any trace of words that have long since expired, when finally – for lack of sharing in common sufficient words that are still intelligible – they wonder if there is anything left to bequeath to those who come after them.

The question of the human person and the possibility of a universal ethic

Whatever the forms of *humanity*, as defined above (cultures, values, knowledge) that they share, humans all possess an *equal dignity*. But what indeed is a human person? Laws, whether national or international, can assist in the recognition of the diversity of cultures, of their plurality and their specificity. One must also respect each individuality and singularity. Now one becomes conscious of the existence of a human's singularity over and beyond his culture and all its particularities when one is aware of one's own vulnerability despite all the material wealth that one might possess. This is a vulnerability that begins in the very first days of life, as Lucien Sève (2006: 51) points out:

The person is much more than a legal fiction or a postulate of moral reason, she or he is a real being; but this reality [...] is from a purely secular point of view totally irreducible to that of a biophysical individuality, it is essentially historico-social in nature. That implies equally that in a quite profane sense the essence of the person goes well beyond the natural individual, since it emanates from civilizational heritage which vastly overlays it and which one might characterize as *the order of the person*.

An active member of the National Consultative Committee for Ethics in France from 1983 to 2000, Lucien Sève imagines an *order of the person* that is not derived from nature but is historico-social. However, he asserts that it is difficult to conceive of this order if one starts out from the respect due 'as much to the psychosocial as to the neurobiological individual'. Other approaches may equally turn out less pertinent. For indeed, is it possible to command respect for the human person from the basis of law, religion, or morality? Kant's categorical imperative is insufficient for this, and the perspective envisaged by Levinas (1990), that of the ethical obligation arising from the 'face-to-face encounter' with the other, also has its limits 'given that there are also human beings capable of crushing a face underfoot' (Sève, 2006: 52).

The 'order of the person' refers thus to 'the set of human forms, both material and conceptual, shaped by history over the centuries and still developing, in which little by little the consciousness

of an intransgressible *value of the human* has become objectivized and from which this consciousness becomes more or less subjectivized in each individual' (ibid.). This value constitutes a whole world which inhabits the person and establishes that person as an individual who resembles no other. This world emerges from the ancestral respect accorded the dead and to each separate body. However, this same world proves so complex and contradictory that it projects the value of the human as a dignity which is then open to question, in relation, for example, to whether certain exceptional cases can be accepted as persons. As a consequence, out of a concern to formulate 'a universally acceptable concept of the human person', Lucien Sève proposes the terms *person for him-/herself* (Fr. *personne pour soi*) to refer to the conscious individual with the capacity to be responsible for his or her acts, and *person in him-/herself* (Fr. *personne en soi*) to include those exceptions which reinforce the existence of the world of the human: 'the new-born child, the autistic individual, the mentally deficient, the accident victim in a prolonged vegetative state ...' (2006: 55). Yet before the new-born baby comes into the world, she or he will have already progressed through many states, considered as development stages of her or his biological life. So where does the 'world of the human' begin? Where does it end? Does it perhaps require a different orientation? If so, according to what principles?

Alain Badiou (2012) shows that there cannot be 'a generalized ethic'. What is being sought here is not so much the respect for the person or the human as the constitution of a subject. Badiou adheres to an 'ethics of truths' that is different from the 'ethics of human rights' which, when viewed up close, could well come down to an ethics 'of the dominant civilization'. For the integration of immigrants (say into French society) that such an ethic proposes suggests the suppression of difference. But Man (as capitalized) is for Badiou neither a simple mortal nor a victim. He is 'the most resilient [*résistant*] and the most paradoxical of animals' (Badiou, 2012: 16). The starting point for Badiou's analysis (2012: 12) is that Man is an immortal: 'An immortal: that is what the worst situations that can be inflicted upon Man show him to be, in so far as he distinguishes himself within the varied and rapacious flux of life.' This immortal perseveres upon the path of truth. He is distrustful of beliefs and the multiplicity of opinions which construct the world of 'communication'. For him, the important question is this: '[H]ow will I, as some-one, *continue* to exceed my own being? How will I link the things I know, in a consistent fashion, via the effects of being seized by the non-known [*l'insu*]' (Badiou, 2012: 50). Does not persevering down the path of truth mean keeping an open mind in order to be able to make reasonable choices even in situations of extreme emergency?

Conclusion

A global consciousness means first of all having an awareness of the common problems which concern the future of humanity. The events that we experience instruct us about the omnipresence of evil and the banality of death. We know just how difficult it is to precisely define what is good and how complex are the notions of 'world' and 'humanity'.

Thus, even with a global consciousness we can act only locally. The ethic that we seek involves a questioning of what exactly is the world of the human, its history, its values, its multiple modes of inhabitation and, *in fine*, it concerns the gamut of actions that are pursued day by day in the struggle against the annihilation of the self and the collapse of the spaces of habitation. It poses the question of how to respond to disasters that have already occurred and to those looming over the world in the near future.

At a time when there are glaring inequalities dividing the global world, a world which generates people who are deemed 'undesirable', it is possible to wonder whether the way human rights are expressed has any basis of solidity. International intervention in crisis situations no doubt saves lives, but it is equally possible to view it as the promotion of strategic pieces on the chessboard of

conquest or predation. Interference in the internal affairs of a state does not bring freedom to an oppressed people if the latter does not itself control the resources necessary for its own emancipation. How is it possible to find these salutary resources within oneself, to derive the will, preferably a well-disposed one, to decide one what conduct to pursue when emergencies and lack of time replace other forms of temporality that consolidate social cohesion?

When the horizon becomes indistinct, it is much better to be *some-one* (a decent woman or man) rather than nothing. It is here that we rediscover one of the senses of the word 'humanity': having a 'solid mind'. Choosing to be *some-one* rather than just a thing or an instrument in the service of a power. For whatever our multiple places of habitation, we all share the amazing aptitude to become such a some-one, by which we are better able to welcome the other. Taking care of oneself, fulfilling the task for which we are in the world: to think creatively when national or international political activity has collapsed, and when global economics spreads its mercantile doctrines to the uttermost street-corners of the world. To rise above common opinion, to break with prejudice, to get to know one's own world and that of others. Education, at all ages and both formally and informally, must address these imperatives for an ethic of the everyday. Science and culture, creativity and thought appear as the only alternatives available for constructing a habitable world, to improve the condition for men and women out of suffering and solitude. Making judgements *from one's heart and conscience* could well be a suitable maxim. But the awareness of evil is not something we are born with, it must be shaped and focused in order that we may find the way towards truth. This is how we may learn to recognize the good, however slight it may be, that exists in the midst of multiple catastrophes. In writing these lines I am thinking of the dark days that Côte d'Ivoire has recently experienced, for it is through such events that our consciences are shaped and our thoughts are formed.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

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