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in a Time of Transition*

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## STUDIES AND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

Energy Ethics: a Literature Review <i>Giovanni Frigo</i>	177
Contesting the Radical Monopoly: a Critical View on the Motorized Culture from a Cyclonaut Perspective <i>Damien Delorme</i>	215
Desiring Ethics: Reflections on Veganism from an Observational Study of Transitions in Everyday Energy Use <i>Alice Dal Gobbo</i>	233
Ethical Risk and Energy <i>Bertrand Andre Rossert</i>	251
Coal Feeds My Family: Subsistence, Energy, and Industry in Central Appalachia <i>M. Joseph Aloï</i>	269
Human Energy: Philosophical-Anthropological Presuppositions of Anthropogenic Energy, Movement, and Activity and Their Implications for Well-being <i>Roman Meinhold</i>	287

COMMENTS, DEBATES, REPORTS AND INTERVIEWS

Energy Ethics Outside the Box: Carl Mitcham in Conversation with Giovanni Frigo <i>Carl Mitcham - Giovanni Frigo</i>	301
Energy Equality and the Challenges of Population Growth <i>Andrea Natan Feltrin</i>	313
The Energy of Ethics / The Ethics of Energy: a Dialog with Irigaray, Varela and Jullien <i>Federico Battistutta</i>	321

REVIEWS

Alex Epstein, <i>A Review of the Moral Case for Fossil Fuels</i> (2014) <i>Adam Briggie</i>	331
Author Guidelines	335

# The Energy of Ethics / The Ethics of Energy

## A Dialog with Irigaray, Varela and Jullien

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### 1. ONE ENERGY

One of the recurring *topoi* in human self-comprehension resides in the claimed existence of a radical dichotomy between nature and culture. Such opposition appears as an invariant element, an assumption difficult to overcome as it seems pervasive within diverse, ever-changing human experiences. In light of historical evidence from very different cultural contexts (from the native inhabitants of North America to those of the Far-East and Africa), this self-perception is, after all, the specific product of western metaphysics. Moreover, archeological evidence shows that the notion of a dualist agency acting in the world is present since the Paleolithic period – day/night, masculine/feminine, human/animal, life/death and so forth (Anati 1983, 116-8). However, not all cultures have thematized the existence of contrasting and conflicting dualities that both imply and result in necessary hierarchies.

For example, for many indigenous people (Kopenawa and Albert 2013), one is necessarily within nature, as part of a continuous web of relations with other living beings. Anthropological and ethnographic researches (Descola 2013) as well as archeological evidence (Chavailon 1996) attest that the supposedly untreatable conflict between nature and culture is nothing but a description, the direct result of a peculiar western understanding and its relationship with nature. Western cultures have interpreted the relationship between human civilization and its rules on one side, and the complexity of the natural world on the other (which in any case resides and lives within us as much as outside) in conflicting terms. Accordingly, the natural world has been considered the potential source of countless harms and dangers as to become conducive

to a regime of strict control over these threatening forces. This idea of establishing control has expanded from human societies and individuals to other animals, the path of rivers, atmospheric phenomena and even ecosystems. But, less visibly, what has gone under control are also the instincts, the dreams and the desires of human nature.

Looking more closely, what we call culture is nothing but the expression of human nature, the result of specific biological and especially cognitive capacities that have enabled human animals to gather food, build shelters, orient themselves, socialize, ask questions and give life meaning. It is not by accident that the term “culture” derives from the Latin verb *còlere*, namely something simple and practical: the act of “cultivating” with one’s own hands, being able to till the soil. What is needed then, is the development of a discourse and a *praxis* that puts culture back into nature. To achieve that, it is necessary to question assumptions of human exceptionalism first. It is also paramount to realize that the characteristics we deem as unique and privileged are actually just some of the possible combinations among many that are present in all living beings. In this comment, I argue that one, vast energy runs through and nourish all living beings. For humans, the task is that of understanding how to channel, articulate and relate this energy to the rest of life. To achieve this goal, I propose to follow some insights of contemporary thinkers – Luce Irigaray, Francisco Varela and François Jullien – who, from different perspectives, have explored new ways to think about ethics that seem timely and useful. Moreover, I will grapple with some ideas derived from the psychoanalytic tradition in order to overcome their hopeless implications and offer instead a more positive outlook. Freud believed that the only solution to the incurable distress of modern civilization would consist in the transformation of neurotic misery into collective unhappiness (Freud 2012). Here, I prefer to suggest a different path.

## 2. LANGUAGES OF WAR

The radical opposition between nature and culture typical of western sensibility – along with its implicit anthropocentrism and the humanistic metaphysics of the subject – has produced various results, among which profound ethical implications. First, the idea that humans are the only oral subjects and thus the exclusive bearers of rights, which probably derives from the ancient Aristotelian argument that ethics is that branch of philosophy that studies *human* conduct. Nature, being considered an entity without any subjectivity cannot benefit from neither moral consid-

erability nor rights. In other words, the assumption is that non-human animals and trees, strata of humus and minerals serve human purposes exclusively. Second, humans set up an apparatus to control human essence, something dangerously natural and for that very reason potentially untamable. Luce Irigaray notices that western cultural identity is built on the submission of nature to rules and techniques which are aimed at dominating it and this kind of dichotomy does not favor the production, circulation and transformation of energy (Irigaray 2011, 21).

On a different note, despite the fact that Freud's psychoanalysis began with the goal of unveiling the moralism of European society of his time, it also ended up serving this function of control. A quick glimpse at Freudian terminology will help explaining this aspect. It is not by chance that when Freud describes intrapsychic life he employs terms such as defense mechanisms, conflictual situations to be managed, assaults on the Ego, systems of prohibitions, enslavement of the Ego and so forth (Laplanche and Pontalis 1967, *passim*). In other terms, Freud explains psychic processes such as desire, affection, love and fear in terms of conflict, namely all the psychic energy that fluctuates through the subject. This normative, war-related language (assaults, defenses, prohibitions) echoes the political categories of friend-foe, where the enemy becomes the other within us, that is something that belongs to us and remains nevertheless different. This is, of course, a description that mirrors a millennia-long patriarchal culture that is still pervasive within the western world. It is legitimate to ask whether it would be possible, and more beneficial, to experiment with a lexicon alternative to the Freudian terminology. A different approach would move us beyond the conflicting vision in which the human subject appears separated within and oppressed by a twofold danger, between a nature that is hard to control and a culture that acts as a controller.

### 3. ETHICS AND DRIVES

However, the Freudian narrative is not only that. Freud talks also about a driving energy that flows through the subject. More often he uses the term libido, the force with which a certain drive manifests (Freud 1969, 282). With Jung, then, this notion broadens to describe more generally the psychic energy that is present in everything and manifests itself as a tendency towards something, an *appetitus* (Jung 1976). In any case, Freud approached psychic functioning according to three avenues: dynamic, topic and economic. In the first case, psychic phenomena are

derived from the re-composition of the driving forces. In the second, the psychic apparatus is the result of interconnected systems with different functions. Third case is the hypothesis that psychic processes depend on the circulation and distribution of impulsive energy. This latter can be quantified, equalize, it can grow or diminish depending on the psychic charges that call for satisfaction. It is in this sense that some have talked about an “hydraulic principle” following Freud’s use of terms related to fluids and flows: tanks, flux, discharge, canalization and so forth. This hydraulic theory considers emotions, desires and sentiments as fluids that circulate in the mind, likewise the blood in the circulatory system. So, the notion of impetus or drive becomes a sort of limit-concept between the psychic and the somatic (Freud, 1976, 17). It goes without saying that this idea was already present in Descartes who conceptualized the nervous system in a pneumatic fashion, suggesting that the nerves function similarly to tubes that transmit the pressure of “animal spirits” to the brain and then to the muscles (Descartes 1994).

For Irigaray, we shall move from the actualized, dynamic process (energy charge), from the flowing of this energy fluxes that pass through and fuel life. But not to create a technology aimed at controlling these impulses, but rather to better understand them, to foster their flow, within and outside our skin. The problem, Irigaray argues, is to find a way to cultivate a natural energy that, in the West, has been known only as instincts, impetus or passions more or less human, more or less pathological and reprehensible (Irigaray 2011, 23). Moving from this perspective, the central questions of ethics can be fruitfully tackled. But how can we reconcile such alternative approach with a tradition that considers ethics as a system of norms and rational values? How can we overcome the idea that ethics is meant to judge and sanction what is good or evil?

#### 4. INTELLIGENT AWARENESS

Chilean philosopher and neuroscientist Francisco Varela has recently suggested that it is possible to develop a non-normative ethics, one that is not based on the primacy of rationality but rather on spontaneity. Moving from an original comparison between contemporary cognitive sciences and eastern traditions, Varela has proposed that ethics should be understood as a praxis that gathers all the energies available to the subject instead of a theory based on reason (Varela 1999). Varela has stressed the immediacy of perception-action, that is the primacy assigned to the immediate relation with occurring events rather than the abstract,

a posteriori theorization of rules and judgements regarding right or wrong. This change of approach defines a paradigm shift: the cognitive process that leads to an ethical action is not logical, formal and abstract but instead it is contextual, practical, embodied as the human subject participates in it with its totality. Knowledge, for Varela, depends on the recognition of having a body with all its sensorial capacities and the ability to move, all of which are also part of broader historical, cultural and biological dimensions. This line of reasoning brought Varela to consider ethics as closer to a specific type of wisdom based on living experience rather than a rational inquiry. The wise person is moral not because she represents ethics but because she embodies it. In this way Varela's intelligent awareness orients actions without obeying to rules or codified protocols. It faces the concrete situations, *becomes* action, *is* the action. The other key dichotomy of western thought – that between subject and object of action – crumbles as well and allows the emergence of a praxis in which immediate deliberation trumps the rational one. This is the energy of ethics.

Varela clarifies his thinking through some examples. One is the case of a car accident, in which an immediate human reaction would be to help other humans involved in the accident, following an intuition. Actions such as this, true ethical events, do not derive from judgements, reasoning or the application of codes. These types of thinking may as well hinder the aid by suggesting avoiding such action.

## 5. THE ENERGY OF WISDOM

Besides Irigaray and Varela, the tension between wisdom and logic has been investigated also by philosopher François Jullien. His research on the bifurcation between western philosophy and eastern wisdom suggests that western philosophy has become a form of speculation whereas eastern thought has conserved a fundamental connection to wisdom (Jullien 1998). Jullien's work is not a form of exoticism nor an attempt to stick to a presumed originality at all costs. Jullien maintains that the language of wisdom differs from the habitual, mainstream ways of thinking of the western tradition. For instance, truth can be left aside, skepticism is good because it protects thinking from becoming too codified and therefore partial.

This discourse has important consequences for ethics, further clarifying Varela's points above. For Jullien the truly wise man has *no ideas*. The sage does not create hierarchies of ideas, privileging some over others.

There is no foundational moment or principle, but everything is always flowing. As a result, since nothing is primary, the potential of all reality is conserved. We can keep all possibilities open because we are capable of holding everything together, in a relationship with the world that does not move from prejudices. If the experience of reality is a changing process in continuous transformation one has to remain open to possibilities rather than adhere to one option.

The sage's perspective is always open, there is no organizer, nothing to be said, nothing to blame or praise. And despite that, this is not irenic passivity or indifference. The subject can still engage with the world but without assuming a fix position in it. In this way the subject participates in reality but remains completely free to follow and answer according to the situation, allowing himself/herself to draw from the energy of ethics. For these reasons, all norms, including those of ethics, are arbitrary. They are at the same time too partial (they come from a specific perspective) and too general (they do not account for the specificity of singular experiences). In this regard, Jullien talked in an earlier book about the opportunity to move from the ethics of prescription to the ethics of promotion (Jullien 2017).

## 6. CONCLUSION

Let me conclude by clarifying in which sense the sage follows the middle way. It is important to underline that here we are far away from Aristotle, Horatius or the medieval Scholastics, all that *aurea mediocritas* that searches a balanced equilibrium between two extremes and avoids exaggerations on both sides (the ancient *in medio stat virtus*). The wisdom of the middle way is different from that. Far from being prudent, fearful or resigned, the wisdom of the middle way dares. It can be a praxis of the extremes that, because it does not alienate itself in a predetermined position, can move from one pole to the other.

The expression of a subject in a specific moment, although always contingent, is not mere obedience to cultural coordinates. By drawing from a multitude of energies, some of which are still unknown or ignored, the subject recognizes the energy of ethics, something ever-alive and ever-throbbing. At the same time, this manifest an ethics of energy, that is a relational behavior that is inscribed in and springs from the bowels of reality, that immense vital depository that makes us all live and die.



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