Essay

For a Psychoanalysis that Loves and Respects the Earth

WRITTEN BY

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The scientific information available to us today is sufficiently clear and precise to allow us to look at the world less distractedly surprised, more consciously mature regarding the effects of the Anthropocene.

From an ecological ethics perspective, we must look with clearly alarmed eyes, not naively optimistic or irresponsibly indifferent, at the unlimited consumption of the planet's resources, thoughtlessly considered inexhaustible. Today we can relate human beings to the exploitation of Mother Earth with what Freud wrote in "Clarifications on the Two Principles of Mental Events" (1911) regarding His Majesty the Child, who takes for granted and without limits, with no possibility of extinction, the maternal availability to respond to his urgent needs, and with the child described by Melanie Klein (1935), whose unconscious fantasy consists of the inexhaustibility of the maternal breast, which he wants to fully possess, just like her entire body. It was Harold Searles (1960), during the years when the atomic threat loomed and the fear of the planet's destruction existed, who gave meaning and value to the "non-human" environment, to everyday habitat. The plant world, animals, the architectural structures of domestic and extra-domestic environments, utensils, furnishings—everything that today could be defined as the biosphere—plays an equally decisive role as the affective environment and the social milieu in psychic formation, especially in childhood. The sense of relatedness between the human and the non-human has begun to be distorted, interrupted alongside the ecological deterioration that causes apathy as a defense against various forms of anxiety, which manifest at various levels concerning the development of individuals' Ego.

Unconsciously identifying ourselves with what we perceive as the omnipotent and immortal technology, we do not want to see the dark side of our social well-being and Western lifestyle, despite the abundant information on the seriousness of the situation.

We tend to protect ourselves from intolerable feelings of insignificance, deprivation, loss, fear of death, and the guilt that would arise from recognizing our implicit complicity or coexistence with the inhuman, understood as the annihilation of the human, with the blind exploitation of natural resources, and with the costs and destructive consequences that follow, by reacting with severe and pervasive apathy. Apathy can manifest itself at times as indifference, carelessness, neglect, greed, inattention, laziness, or minimization. Apathy, understood as a deficit of interest and involvement, allows us to de-problematize our fears by emphasizing the length of time before the consequences of climate change are fully felt, or by skeptically undermining the credibility and authority of science.

We continue to breathe, drink water, swim in the sea, play in the snow, and enjoy the greenery without hesitation and without a concrete perception of danger, tending to produce simplified narratives and interpretations. If the conviction in the right to acquired well-being begins to falter, a paralysis of thought starts to creep in, along with a sense of irreparability, an intense anxiety, and an unsettling feeling about a future that shifts from a promise to a threat.

Problems that are too large, too complex, and not immediately visible confront us with our impotence to tackle them. We tend to defend ourselves by smoothing out cognitive

dissonances, which in turn foster disinterest, distancing dynamics, or even narrow-mindedness. We feel compelled to shrink our minds, to implement a true system of anti-knowledge, living as amorphous spectators without any responsibility rather than as intrinsically co-responsible actors, because it is difficult to accept our participation in such an enormous crime. The concept of "environmental melancholia," introduced by Lerzman (2015), describes the condition of unworked mourning in relation to the effects of the climate emergency. It is not apathy (lack of *pathos*), emotional inertia, or a lack of awareness, but rather the fact that feeling too much and too intensely would lead to paralysis and a sense of powerlessness to act.

It is essential to emphasize the concept of the planet's habitability, according to which any living organism creates the conditions for life for others. There is nothing intentional, harmonious, or providential about Gaia; rather, there is only a useful interaction between the living conditions of the various organisms that inhabit it. David Quammen (2018) writes that recent research has shown that genes do not move only vertically, from one generation to the next, but also laterally, crossing species boundaries and even passing from one kingdom to another.

We should become advocates for the preservation of common goods and the appreciation of beauty in all its forms. Along with beauty, we must value psychological and physical well-being, as well as the future of our children and grandchildren, preventing denials, fossilizations, or psychic encystments—so prevalent in today's psyche—from settling and reproducing in the psyches of future generations. These patterns could replicate the serious harm we are inflicting on the environment, as a kind of ancestral burden passed down to descendants. By devaluing the contract that binds each individual to the whole and the whole to each individual, we—bound to the earth and the earth to us—transmit symptoms, defense mechanisms, and the organization of object relations. These serve as the signifiers through which the forms and processes of an individual's psychic reality are articulated, connecting with the forms and processes that take shape in intersubjective bonds and, more generally, in the relationship with the environment (Kaës, 1993).

It is necessary to seek and help create a new bioethics for the future, accepting the complexity of global reality, where the good and the bad are not easily identifiable or untangled. Instead of succumbing to the fantasy of recreating the nostalgic certainty of a time and place when human groups of the past supposedly lived in an Edenic natural harmony with an untouched environment, we must avoid projecting our own romantic idealizations onto them.

Ulysses' passionate appeal to his companions to continue their journey beyond the Pillars of Hercules, the last boundary of the then-known world—"Consider your origins: you were not made to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge"—should, in my view, be read as an encouragement for a continuous effort to integrate the insuppressible and courageous desire for knowledge and progress inherent in human nature with a virtuous, yet equally courageous, depressive acknowledgment of one's own limits. This virtue, often downplayed by commentators, deserves more attention.

I believe that Bateson's (1972) metaphor of the acrobat on a tightrope suspended in the void, who, in order not to fall, requires the greatest freedom to move from one position of instability to another, aptly represents the emotional and existential condition of modern man. This condition is marked by a conflicting alternation between the activation of defense mechanisms and the slower yet continuous processes of individual and collective awareness, as well as the depressive acceptance of the limits of progress and the finitude of the human condition.

Today, psychoanalysts, while referring to a psychoanalytic culture rooted in tradition, must possess a great openness of mind to address new psychosocial realities and deepen the study of the new challenges of civilization, as well as the new expressions of psychological suffering related to the disintegration of traditional identity structures and the metaphysical guarantees as we have known them until now.

Despite the very narrow timeframe for taking effective action for the good of humanity, we recognize that we are both part of the problem and part of the solution. In the Anthropocene era, we must embrace a new awareness and a new ethics, avoiding dangerous rationalizations. Therefore, let us confront both external impediments and, for us psychoanalysts, internal ones, making every possible effort to foster conditions that promote care and concern for the environment, without losing heart when some of these efforts fail! This is a call to defend nature, as opposed to defending ourselves from nature, which is not ascetic but encourages frugality, generosity, and humility—a term derived from *humus*, meaning earth.

Psychoanalysts should take a clear civic commitment and a firm political stance free from any misunderstanding regarding the urgent need to preserve and care for the world. They should participate in the development of an environmental ethics that encompasses not only the dietary choices we make and the products we decide to purchase, but also the ways in which we construct our homes and cities, and how we move within our territories.

They should revive within themselves the capacity to think and dream of a better future, engaging in and contributing to the appreciation of a sense of measure, balance, and sobriety. This involves maintaining a life that is sufficiently good, where there is room for love and creativity, as well as for knowledge, while countering magical and illusory thinking. They must also contemplate with integrity and sincerity the unpleasant aspects of existence.

Dante Alighieri writes in the *Purgatorio*, referring to Virgil:

"You acted like someone who walks at night, carrying the light behind them, which does not benefit themselves, but illuminates those who follow."

(*Purgatorio*, XXII, 67-69)

Similarly, we analysts should operate like one who, in the darkness, illuminates those who are on the path behind them—not working for their own benefit, but making those who follow them more knowledgeable and capable.

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