

Ecological crisis and the thesis of human exception

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April 29, 2023



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(from the [Alphonsian Academy blog](#))

This post asserts that the main cause of the current socio-environmental crisis is the dualistic anthropological conception that has prevailed in Western philosophy^[1]. Indeed, Western culture has accentuated the separation between man and other creatures (ontic dualism), and has also divided the human being internally, making a clear separation between soul and body (ontological dualism).

In this sense, the encyclical *Laudato si'* affirms that “there can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology” (LS118), and that we need to overcome those unhealthy dualisms, that “left a mark on certain Christian thinkers in the course of history” (LS 98).

1. Ontological dualism

Ontological dualism distinguishes clearly between the body and the spiritual/rational dimension of man. The latter would be the most authentically human and, therefore, the body should be subordinated to it. The human being is described using “multiple oppositional pairs: body/soul, rationality/affectivity, need/freedom, nature/culture, instinct/morality, etc.”

In the seventeenth century, Descartes makes a net separation between the rational soul and the body. The first would be the essence of man, who is characterized by his ability to think (*res cogitans*), while his body would be only a material addition that does not differ substantially from those of animals. Both dimensions of the human being would come into contact through the pineal gland.

The emphasis on one of these two elements (body/soul) will give rise to two opposing trends in the understanding of the human being (idealism and materialism), both characterized by a strong dualism. Idealism focuses on rationality and neglects the corporeal dimension. On the other hand, materialism reduces man to the materiality of his body, considering the body as a mere cosmic element.

2. Ontic dualism

Ontic dualism was already present in ancient Greece, where the human being is seen as an essentially different being from the other animals, because he is endowed with the *logos* (word, reason), while all other living creatures are irrational, and their actions do not go beyond the level of instincts or habits.

Centuries later, René Descartes (1596-1650) accentuates that dualistic separation and affirms that the animal is a mere machine that, being made by God, “is incomparably better arranged, and possesses in itself movements which are much more admirable than any of those which can be invented by man.”

In line with the Cartesian epistemology, the Enlightenment movement asserts that reason is the essence of the human being (*res cogitans*) and so he is clearly different from the rest of the universe (*res extensa*). Humans are rational and free, whereas all non-human creatures respond to the rigid laws of dynamics.

The world is not seen as a communion of subjects, but as a bunch of objects, described in mathematical and geometric terms. More specifically, it is defined as clock, machine, workshop, experiment. To understand its operation, it is enough to resort to the principles of matter and movement. The world is observed and perceived in a functionalist and utilitarian way. The animals would be like machines, irrational and determined by biological mechanisms.

3. The thesis of human exception

Based on those two dualisms, the thesis of human exception postulates an ontic rupture between us and the rest of creation; that is, “a radical separation between human beings and other forms of life,” which would belong to another order of being. Consequently, man

considers nature as pure neutral matter, without any intrinsic value, totally available at his disposal.

J.M. Schaeffer affirms that the thesis of human exception is based not only on the ontic and ontological dualisms, but also on the exclusive human capacity to access epistemic and ethical knowledge and to do so in ways that are out of reach for all other creatures. The major forms of this theory are three:

1) *Philosophical*: man is considered an “ego;” i.e. a “subject” radically autonomous and founder of his own being. Therefore, human identity does not depend on biological or social life.

2) *Social*: human identity is substantiated in the social. The human being is considered “non-natural” or even “unnatural.” Biological life would be only “the substratum of humanity.”

3) *Cultural*: the real human identity is based on culture, which shows human’s capacity of creating symbolic systems. That “cultural transcendence is opposed to ‘nature’ and to the ‘social.’”^[i]

Conclusion

The current socio-environmental crisis is a consequence of that essentialist anthropology that divides man internally and separates him neatly from other living beings. H. Bergson (1859-1941) affirms that the thesis of human exception is “the architrave of modern philosophy, at least from the Copernican revolution onwards.”

However, in recent decades, the socio-environmental crisis is forcing a change in this way of conceiving nature and relating to it. In 2007, Schaeffer announced the “end of human exception”.

[i] The following paragraphs are mostly taken from our book: Carbajo-Núñez M., *Everything is Connected. Integral ecology and communication in the Digital Age*, TAU Publishing, Phoenix (AZ) 2021.

[ii] Schaeffer J.M., *El fin de la excepción humana*, 14 & 24-26.