Justice and Otherness

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Replacing the modern liberal concept of the free and sovereign subject with the interdependent, vulnerable and responsible subject, Corine Pelluchon bases politics on an ethical ontology. But does she not thereby disregard the actual organization of the social world, our critique of which makes it possible for us to think about the relationship between ethics and politics?

Reviewed: Corine Pelluchon, *Éléments pour une éthique de la vulnérabilité*: *Les hommes, les animaux, la nature*. Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 352 pp., 24 €.

In her latest book, *Éléments pour une éthique de la vulnérabilité* (Elements of an Ethics of Vulnerability), Corine Pelluchon revisits and develops the investigations conducted in her previous one, *L'autonomie brisée* (Broken Autonomy)[1]. *Éléments* begins with the observation that liberal contractualism is unable to offer a satisfactory response to some moral and political problems that are central in contemporary liberal democratic societies—the ecological problem, the problem of how to treat animals, and the problem of organizing work and social solidarity. Pelluchon aims to revise political liberalism so that it can respond to current-day challenges. The book's initial observation, the topics it discusses, and its theoretical ambition are clearly reminiscent of Martha Nussbaum's book published in 2006, *Frontiers of Justice*,[2] in which this American philosopher sets out to criticize and to deepen Rawlsian political liberalism by confronting it with three issues that she thinks it manages neither to formulate nor to resolve: the inclusion of disabled people, justice towards animals, and international justice. However, the originality of Pelluchon's approach is clear, as much from its methods as from the tone of her enquiry. These differences can be summarized by saying that her project appears to be more radical than Nussbaum's. Pelluchon goes beyond

[1] C. Pelluchon, *L'autonomie brisée*: *Bioéthique et philosophie*, Paris, PUF, 2009.
[2] M. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*: *Disability, Nationality and Species Membership*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2006.

trying to correct political liberalism by identifying its structural limits, and sets out to refound it on a radically revised ontology of the subject, and she maintains that this is the only way for political liberalism and contemporary liberal societies to respond to the problems of ecology, just treatment of animals, and organizing work and social solidarity. This ontology, inspired by the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas, is based on the category of vulnerability; it leads to the elaboration of an ethics in which otherness, responsibility and consideration are the central categories and the goal is (as Pelluchon puts it) "inspiring another politics,"[3] in other words, enabling us to rethink and to radically reform our social and political organization.

A Common Root of Evil in Issues of Ecology, Animal Rights and Work Organization

Pelluchon's *Éléments*, the subtitle of which is *Les hommes, les animaux, la nature* (Men, Animals, and Nature), unfolds in three stages, in which her thesis emerges more and more clearly. A first part is dedicated to ecology (p. 59-152); here the author describes thinkers about deep ecology (A. Naess, H. Rolston, A. Leopold), who are credited with having posed the ecological question at the ontological level although without drawing all the political implications. In a second part, the investigation turns towards the issue of justice towards animals (p. 153-221), and here Pelluchon discusses the approach that is generally taken by the concept of law and its problematic presuppositions—first and foremost the search for a criterion for differentiating between men and animals, and the wish to define and to maintain something "proper to men." Finally, the third part develops reflection on the organization of work and social solidarity. Here the common thread is a critique of standards of profitability and performance. Studying the effects that these standards have on workers (p. 225-250), their impacts in the field of education and culture (p. 250-274), and the obstacles that they constitute for the inclusion of the disabled (p. 273-306), Pelluchon shows that in the end they endanger our very ability to see the world as a world in common.

At first sight, it may seem surprising to connect these issues that are generally treated separately and that relate to traditionally distinct fields in moral, social and political philosophy. Why ask all at once about our political inability to take on board the current environmental crisis, the violence we are capable of with regard to animals, and the physical and social damage caused by forms of social organization that make work and the inclusiveness of citizens subject only to the imperatives of profitability and performance? Although Pelluchon explains the plan of her cross-survey in the introduction, only gradually does the reader become aware of her conclusion that these political and social phenomena are

[3] C. Pelluchon, *Éléments pour une éthique de la vulnérabilité*, Paris, Cerf, 2011, p. 20.

in fact rooted in a single moral ill, of which they are all differentiated symptoms. They express at different levels the blindness caused by a concept of the subject that was gradually established in modernity: the concept of the sovereign subject, mainly defined by its negative liberty, enjoying a unique ontological position in the universe and therefore entitled to use and to abuse everything that surrounds it, according to its projects and preferences (p. 23). If we fail to "think like a mountain" (p. 64), [4] if we do not manage to recognize the capacity of a plant to create value (p. 92) or that of an animal "to configure a world" (p. 145-146), if we do not understand that work cannot be completely subject to criteria of evaluation (p. 235-242) and if we are incapable of recognizing the positive side of a disability (p. 277-282), it is because we are prisoners of a concept of the subject and of the world that prevents us from correctly seeing what we are and the interdependencies that unite us to others, whether to natural beings, animals or other men.

For Pelluchon, our practices and our relations with the various beings that people our universe thus reveal how we think about ourselves. In other words, the indifference, insensitivity and violence that they express and permit indicate the limits of the modern concept of the subject and the fact that it does not let us raise, or even leads us to conceal, the question of what she calls our "right to be" (p. 40).

The Humanism of Otherness and the Ethics of Vulnerability

In light of this diagnosis we can understand Pelluchon's central thesis, that we can develop a more satisfactory concept of justice, which includes in its field of enquiry the issue of relations not only with other men but also with the Earth and with animals, only if we change our ontology, i.e. the way that we think about ourselves in relation to the others. Thus she proposes to replace the concept of the subject defined by its independence and sovereignty with one defined by its vulnerability and responsibility, two categories that she reworks in tandem in order to elaborate a humanism of otherness.

In her perspective, vulnerability does not primarily mean being susceptible to injury. It means rather the presence of a triple otherness (p. 40-41; p. 320-321), which gives the subject the aspect of being "broken" (p. 309). This otherness is primarily that of a living body, exposed to the passage of time and to suffering; it is also psychic, making impossible any absolute self-knowledge or self-mastery; finally and above all it is openness to the other, on

[4] Pelluchon takes this phrase from Aldo Leopold. See Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, Oxford University Press, USA, 1949, paperback 1968.

whom I am dependent and who is also dependent on me, and to whose power I am exposed as he is exposed to mine. So to Pelluchon, experience of vulnerability is experience at the same time both of otherness in itself and of the otherness of the other, who presents himself to me as equally vulnerable. That is why vulnerability is intimately related to responsibility: in the experience of vulnerability is heard "the call of the other," addressing to the subject the question of his right to be, and arousing in him a concern that for Pelluchon seems to be the first moment of ethics, understood as a way of relating to others and to the world.

Thus, emphasizing the priority of vulnerability and its connection with responsibility does not lead Pelluchon to promote a victimhood concept of the subject; on the contrary, it enables her to support the idea of a "broadened subject," who "is concerned with the responsibility to be by right, and includes in his will to live the desire to preserve the health of the Earth, not to impose diminished lives on other species, and not to usurp the place of others" (p. 309). As that quotation suggests, this concept of the subject—a concept that ultimately includes the ethics of vulnerability—is the base on which it becomes possible to pose in a different way the question of justice towards the Earth, animals, and other men.

The Missing Political Implications of This Refurbished Ontology

What then is this alternative politics to which we are led by the ethics of vulnerability and the idea of an inextricably vulnerable and responsible subject? Pelluchon does not respond systematically to this question; for each subject studied she suggests lines of thought to be developed. Thus, in response to the current ecological crisis, she draws on Bruno Latour's proposals[5] and supports the need to broaden the democratic model by ensuring that the natural entities with whom we interact are adequately represented in public discussions—which implies rethinking the role of science and scientists in deliberations about what collective directions should be pursued. On the relation to animals, she emphasizes the importance of regarding them as subjects, if not as persons—as bearers of specific ethological needs that should be recognized and respected. She argues that although law can be helpful here, it is mainly through changes in the collective values that we promote—and therefore a transformation of our way of thinking about ourselves—that a just relation with animals can be established. Finally, to remedy the suffering and exclusion caused by the organization of work and social solidarity, Pelluchon draws attention to the need to put an end to the denial of reality that promotes the ideology of performance, and to restore citizens' perceptions of the world in common and our responsibility for it, especially by increasing democracy and

[5] B. Latour, *Politiques de la nature*, (1999), Paris, La Découverte, 2004.

preserving spaces dedicated to public discussions in which everyone can be included and considered.

As can be seen, it is not so much the concrete proposals and institutional measures as it is Pelluchon's refurbished ontology that opens up a way of looking at politics—politics conceived as collective and deliberative activity intended to create the necessary conditions for the coexistence of a plurality of beings who are different but equally worth of consideration. In fact, the book ends with a beautiful analysis of the idea of consideration (p. 302-306), defined as a way of paying attention to other beings without suppressing their otherness. This suggests that in Pelluchon's perspective politics begins with ethics, in other words the transformation of our social and political organization and our modes of collective decision making crucially depends on the way we relate to ourselves and to others.

Therefore one can legitimately ask whether Pelluchon is not reducing politics to ethics. This question is not intended to minimize the benefit of looking at politics through ontology or ethics. Pelluchon is right to emphasize the need to develop a radical critique of the concept of the subject that underpins modern political theory and legitimizes a number of problematic social and political practices. Particularly valuable are her insistence on the importance of our ways of relating ourselves to others, and what that says about what we are; and her analysis of the value of consideration. However, the desire to question social and political organization in a "radical" way, by immediately posing the question at the ontological level, seems to run a risk which it is not clear that Pelluchon has weighed up: that of neglecting to think about the consistency of the social world, the fact that it is irreducible to interpersonal relations and is embodied in institutions and collective practices that crystallize and perpetuate representations and ways of doing things that an individual awareness is not sufficient to call into question.

Perhaps this objection will be clearer if we look at Pelluchon's attitude to the care perspective. Unsurprisingly, given the object of her study, her critique of the liberal concept of the subject, and the importance that she gives to the issue of our ways of relating to others, she frequently mentions the works of care theorists, mainly those of Tronto (see especially p. 27-29 and p. 284-292). However, Pelluchon's references here are usually critical. She objects that the care approach thinks about the vulnerability of subjects without connecting it to the ideas of responsibility (p. 294-295) and autonomy (p. 291-292); that care theorists are unable to radically change our ways of doing society, because they limit themselves to

analysing close relationships (p. 218); and that the transformation of the political order that they call for remains indeterminate (p. 29). Her objections are somewhat surprising, not only in view of the fact that the political and institutional implications that Pelluchon draws from her ethics of vulnerability still need to be developed and clarified, but also in view of the contributions of care theories, which seem much closer than she admits to the ethics of vulnerability, and which also in my opinion feature some strengths that she underestimates. This last point needs to be explained.

Contrary to widespread belief, the care perspective is not limited to an ethical perspective that starts by considering the vulnerability of human lives, draws attention to practices that perpetuate these lives and the world in common, and reveals the provisions underlying these practices—first and foremost, attention to and responsibility for those who depend on us. The care perspective is also and inextricably a reflection on the way in which these practices and provisions have been ascribed, undervalued and rendered invisible in contemporary liberal societies.[6] So although theories of care do address the question of what matters for acting morally, they also pursue other questions: How are what matters and what does not matter socially distributed? How it is possible that we do not see some beings or practices even though they are "right in front of our eyes" (as Sandra Laugier says)?[7] And what are the political and social factors—and consequences—of our blind spots and indifferent attitudes? Because they ask these questions, which indicate a particular sensitivity to issues of domination and oppression—a sensitivity that is explained by their initially feminist impetus—theories of care are from the outset equipped with a critical dimension that radically changes their way of understanding the political. Unlike normative political theories such as Rawls' and Nussbaum's, in the wake of which Pelluchon seems to continue to follow, care theorists do not say to us: given what we are and the problems that we face, this is what we should do or that is how we should think. They seek rather to identify the reasons—thought patterns, but also modes of organization and social relations of domination—why we act as we act, and why we fail—or on the contrary are forced—to pay attention to some things and not to others. In doing this, they also suggest what should be changed in the current organization of society so that we might see ourselves and others otherwise. This critical approach is one of their main contributions on the political level.

[6] On this point, see Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*: *A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, New York and London, Routledge, 1993.
[7] S. Laugier (ed.), *Tous vulnérables? Le care, les animaux et l'environnement*, Paris, Payot, 2012. See especially the Introduction, and p. 8 for the cited quotation.

Understanding this point lets us see why Pelluchon's objections to the care approach seem unfair, as well as what seems missing from her own perspective. By starting off by analysing ordinary practices and what they tell us about the social distribution of attention and indifference, and then showing that this distribution is in large part determined by the social and historical context of these practices, care theories give us a handle on social and political transformation. So they avoid having to confront head-on the thorny question that we feel compelled to ask Pelluchon after reading her book, in which it is not addressed: assuming we are convinced by the ethics of vulnerability, how do we go about replacing the concept of the modern subject—from which comes our inability to relate justly to natural entities, animals, and other men—with a concept of the vulnerable and responsible subject? To do that, should we not identify what it is about the current social organization that enables the concept of the modern subject to persist? In other words, between ontology and politics, do we not have to arrange a necessary detour through social philosophy, the description of ordinary practices, and the analysis of institutions? Perhaps pursuing the ambitious project begun in *L'autonomie brisée* and continued in these *Éléments pour une éthique de la vulnérabilité* will provide a response to these questions. Given the contributions of these two books, we must hope it will.

First published in laviedesidees.fr. Translated from French by **John Zvesper** with the support of the **Institut français**.
Published in booksandideas.net 22 June 2012.