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TOWARDS A *POLIETHICS* OF ENHANCED RESPONSIBILITY

ABSTRACT

This paper aims at providing some insights on the philosophical tools that may help solve the huge problems of social (and environmental) justice. For that purpose, I focus on the concept of *responsibility*, since it could be a suitable catalyst for debate. This paper argues that we must necessarily develop an enhanced notion of responsibility and commit to it both at a social and institutional level. First, I will introduce the relation between ethics and politics –necessarily rather than contingently intertwined. I will comment on the concept of *poliethics* coined by the Spanish philosopher Francisco Fernández Buey. Second, I will address certain changes that the concept of *responsibility* has undergone in the field of ethics and politics in recent years. Finally, I will argue that a significant extension of the notion of responsibility is still necessary if it is to play a relevant role in the contemporary world. I will therefore contend that there are sufficient reasons why our societies should do the *moral stretch exercises* suggested by Günther Anders. For that purpose, I suggest ten tenets that could serve as a basis for this *poliethics* of enhanced responsibility and for a collective reflection on this issue.

POLIETHICS

Let us begin with the obvious: politics is a type of human activity defined by the fact that we are social beings.¹ Aristotle defined the human being as a *zoon politikon*, a social, political animal. Hannah Arendt rightly pointed out that we can only grasp the meaning of that definition if we take into consideration Aristotle's alternative formulation: *zoon logon ekhon*, i.e., animals endowed with *logos*, and hence with language and reason.² These two essential features of human beings are inherently intertwined: we are political creatures *because* we have language and reason, and we have language and reason due to our eminently social nature.³ Based on this interrelation, we can better understand the notion of *politics* in Ancient Greece. To live in a *polis* meant to a large extent that decisions were taken through the use of word and persuasion rather than violence.⁴

Politics is therefore a type of activity that requires more than one person. It is something we do together, something that necessarily calls for interaction. Like *ethics*, politics arises from the fact that in order to survive –and to live well– we depend on others

¹ Several authors argue that politics is not exclusive to humans. According to them, it is possible to speak of *politics* also in higher primate communities. An indispensable reference in this matter is Frans de Waal, who has written many books and articles on the subject. See, among others, Frans B.M. de Waal, *Good Natured* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Frans B.M. de Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics. Power and Sex among apes* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). However, for what concerns us, and given that politics is undoubtedly a type of human activity, we will not deal here with the debate on whether it is exclusively human or not.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 27.

³ For a good explanation of this co-implication, see Leslie Paul Thiele, *Thinking Politics: Perspectives in Ancient, Modern and Postmodern Political Theory* (Nueva Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, 1997), 29.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 26.

and our relations with them. Arendt reminds us in this regard that no human being can live outside of a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings. Hence, any human activity is conditioned from its very outset by the fact that *men live together*.⁵ In light of the foregoing, and for the purpose of this work, I will understand *politics* as a specific type of human activity: a collective endeavor aimed at *organizing collective life to live well in community*.

We know that Aristotle considered *ethics* as a subdivision of *politics*. Since then until today, we can trace a long and heterogeneous tradition of thinkers who have delved into the connection between both. For instance, in Spain we can highlight the contribution of Manuel Sacristán and Francisco Fernández Buey, who further explored Gramsci's understanding of *politics as an ethics of the collective*. Terry Eagleton should also be mentioned, particularly his statement that "ethics and politics are not separate spheres but different viewpoints on the same object."⁶ That object is, precisely, collective life. Jorge Riechmann and Simon Blackburn, among others, have drawn a line between Aristotle's claim that we are social-political animals and the fact that we also are, consequently and inevitably, *moral or ethical animals*.⁷ And it is not because we clearly or naturally identify what is good or correct, but because we make judgments and assessments, and we justify our actions or expect justification for those of others. *Politics* and *ethics* are essential for us because we are disoriented and need guidance in the constitutive realm that for us is the community. We cannot leave that realm nor can we avoid coexisting with others, constantly interacting, assessing, judging and comparing ourselves with them. Extending

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 22.

⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers. A Study of Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 316.

⁷ Simon Blackburn, *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

to politics what Jorge Riechmann has suggested for ethics, we could say that it is not possible to *take moral or political holidays*. We cannot dispose of this trait at will. Being this kind of communal, social animals, defines how we are in the world: we interact with others. Moreover, as we shall see, we are *responsible* beings because we are aware that those others can be harmed (and cared for) by our actions.⁸ Yet, apart from some moral intuitions, there does not seem to be any orientation guide for that everyday interaction with others. We are *deficient* beings, in the sense that we are incomplete. The proposal is, therefore, to understand *ethics* and *politics* as tools that can help us in that difficult task of completing ourselves, of compensating some of our inherent shortcomings.

From this approach, the intertwining between ethics and politics cannot be regarded as accidental but an essential defining characteristic of both of them. That is why I find the term *poliethics*, coined by Francisco Fernández Buey, particularly appropriate. In the back cover of his book *Poliethics*,⁹ Fernández Buey describes it as mainly an intersection between ethics and politics intended to suggest a new path where reflection on our individual moral responsibility and political science converge.

THE NEED FOR AN ENHANCED RESPONSIBILITY

Under different theoretical frameworks, *responsibility* has been regarded as the basic founding category of ethics. As pointed out by Manuel Cruz: “actions and responsibility

⁸ For an elaboration on the notion of “moral holidays”, see Riechmann, J., *Interdependientes y ecodependientes. Ensayos desde la ética ecológica (y hacia ella)* (Barcelona: Proteus, 2012), 20.

Riechmann takes this term from Primo Levi, who used *vacanza morale* to refer to the paralysis of conscience under fascism, with the terrible consequences we all know: Primo Levi, *Vivir para contar. Escribir tras Auschwitz*, trans. Albert Fuentes and Piero dal Bon (Barcelona, Alpha Decay, 2010).

⁹ Francisco Fernández Buey, *Poliética* (Madrid: Losada, 2003).

are intrinsically linked.”¹⁰ But what does *responsibility* mean in this context? The Spanish words “*responsabilidad*” (responsibility) and “*responsable*” (responsible) come from the Latin *respondere*, to respond, to answer, and their first known use was after 1700 – relatively recent, then. Furthermore, *responsabilidad* is etymologically related to the Latin term *spondeo* and the Greek *spendo*, both used to refer to the sacrifice to God under a solemn relationship, as recently recalled by Roberto Esposito.¹¹ According to a famous etymological dictionary prepared by Joaquín Corominas, the first documented use of “*responsable*” was in 1737, and “*responsabilidad*” as such only appeared in the 19th century.¹²

Originally, it was a legal term used in 18th-century England and afterwards in the Napoleonic Code, specifying that everyone shall be accountable (shall answer) for their acts before the law. This notion of responsibility was gradually extended until it achieved some significance in political and moral reflection. Today, when we say that someone is *responsible* for their acts, we do not only imply that such person can be brought to justice –although we certainly refer to that too. The expansion of this modern notion of responsibility is closely linked to the development of democratic political and legal systems and, with them, to the birth of the rule of law. *Responsibility* is a key concept for

¹⁰ Manuel Cruz, *Hacerse cargo. Por una responsabilidad fuerte y unas identidades débiles* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2015), 71.

¹¹ See Roberto Esposito’s foreword to Manuel Cruz, *Hacerse cargo. Por una responsabilidad fuerte y unas identidades débiles*, (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2015), 11.

¹² In English, *responsibility* had appeared in 1771 and the French *responsabilité* in 1798. Both had a great influence in the use of the Spanish notion of *responsabilidad*. See, in this regard, Jorge Riechmann, *Un mundo vulnerable. Ensayos sobre ecología, ética y tecnociencia* (Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 2005), 173.

the determination and attribution of powers, as a counterpart of responsibility. Those who are attributed powers must acknowledge the consequences of their exercise, since they will be held to answer for it.

However, this concept soon reached the field of philosophy. It proved particularly fruitful in ethical and political thinking. In this regard, it is worth recalling Max Weber's classic distinction around the notion of *responsibility*. In his view, ethically-oriented actions can be governed by an *ethics of responsibility* (*Verantwortungsethik*) or by an *ethics of conviction* (*Gesinnungsethik*):

If an action of good intent leads to bad results, then, in the actor's eyes, not he but the world, or the stupidity of other men, or God's will who made them thus, is responsible for the evil. However a man who believes in an ethic of responsibility takes account of precisely the average deficiencies of people¹³.

With this distinction, Weber did not only refer to individual moral actions, but also to those that occur within the framework of politics. That is, also political actions can be governed by an *ethics of conviction* or by an *ethics of responsibility*. In the former case, the subject—either individual or collective—does not feel responsible for the consequences of his/her acts, but holds other entity (the world, History, God's will) responsible for them. However, those who act under an *ethics of responsibility* assess the effects that can derive from their actions. Weber understood that to attain a goal considered good, it is sometimes necessary to use morally questionable means that can cause undesired collateral effects. That was the point where, in his view, ethics of conviction failed: faced with any potentially harmful consequences, such ethics rejected and condemned all

¹³ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Heinrich Gerth and Charles Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 2009), 121.

action. According to the *ethics of conviction*, good intentions are the key to judge the goodness of actions. Involuntary consequences of actions aimed at good goals could therefore be ignored. Instead, the *ethics of responsibility* takes into account and assumes responsibility for the foreseeable consequences of actions. If these seem unbearable, the subject might give up on its action even if it pursues a good goal. As we see, Weber's opposition is still useful.

Philosophy is concerned with another, more far-reaching meaning –although compatible and related to the foregoing. That is, the understanding of *responsibility* as the basic and constitutive category of ethics, stressing its kinship with the issue of *recognition*. Jorge Riechmann describes our immediate relation to the other as a relation of responsibility.¹⁴ In this sense, Zygmunt Bauman held that:

Responsibility, this building block of all moral behaviour, arises out of the proximity of the other. Proximity means responsibility, and responsibility *is* proximity. Discussion of the relative priority of one or the other is admittedly gratuitous, as none is conceivable alone. Defusion of responsibility, and thus neutralization of the moral urge which follows it, must necessarily involve (is, in fact, synonymous with) replacing proximity with a physical or spiritual separation. The alternative to proximity is social distance. The moral attribute of proximity is responsibility; the moral attribute of social distance is lack of moral relationship, or heterophobia.¹⁵

This short excerpt illustrates the relation between *recognition* and *responsibility*. In this regard, Emmanuel Levinas considered that the essential cornerstone of ethics lied, precisely in the immediate assumption that I must act before the suffering of other human

¹⁴ Riechmann, J., *Ética extramuros* (Madrid: UAM Ediciones, 2016), 224.

¹⁵ Bauman, Z., *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 184-185.

being. This impulse arises from the recognition of the *other* as a valuable being and, to a certain extent, equal to one self.¹⁶ According to Levinas, the mere presence of the face of the other is, for every one of us, a demand, it calls us. Before the concern for self we all legitimately feel, ethics invites us to take care of the others, and it requires that we behave responsibly towards them.¹⁷

Nevertheless, if we assume the idea that action cannot be separated from responsibility in the sense here suggested, a question immediately arises on the responsibility that should be attached to the type of actions we can carry out. The combination of different factors leads to the conclusion that the scope of our responsibility must be extended. On the one hand, the equal moral worth of all human beings and their inherent vulnerability give rise to a responsibility to the other members of that moral community. In particular, this materializes in the obligation to prevent unnecessary suffering of others. On the other hand, the reach and potential impact of human actions in industrial societies have increased to unprecedented levels. These greater consequences of our actions (as a result, to a large extent, of the expansion of modern technology and the exacerbated consumption of natural resources) have several implications.

From an ecological point of view, not only have we altered the climate of our ecosystems (with the consequent damage to others), but we are also capable of affecting

¹⁶ On this issue, see, in addition to Levinas' own writings, the approach proposed by Hillary Putnam in *Ethics without ontology*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 24 *et seq.*, as well as in his chapter "Levinas and Judaism" in *The Cambridge companion to Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 33-62.

¹⁷ Roger-Pol Droit has underlined the relevance of Levinas to think our relation with others. See Roger-Pol Droit, *La ética explicada a todo el mundo*, trans. María José Furió (Barcelona: Paidós, 2010), 92.

distant populations with whom we have no direct contact. Moreover, this problem has also a time dimension, as present actions can directly affect the living conditions of future generations with whom we will not coexist. These two vectors –ecological and intergenerational– call for a necessary redefinition of the concept and scope of human responsibility, which should adapt to such new possibilities. In other words, human responsibility should extend according to the potential impact of human actions. As difficult as it may be to determine each one's share, we cannot escape the individual and collective responsibility stemming from actions whose effects reach the whole planet (thus affecting the living conditions of the entire humanity) over a period of time covering future generations.

Furthermore, the type of human action with such serious consequences on ecosystems –some of them, irreversible: (i) is fostered by capitalism; and (ii) is essential for its good functioning. By the former, I refer to the fact that production, distribution and consumption dynamics under capitalism are directly related to the ecological concerns mentioned above. Hence, human action typical of Western capitalist societies is focused on the short term –in the form of excessive consumption– and is oblivious to the social and ecological consequences it may cause. This attitude can only be described as irresponsible and unfair, since it affects those least equipped to press and defend their interests (i.e., people from the poorest regions on the planet and future generations, apart from non-human animals and other living beings).¹⁸ As explained in detail by many

¹⁸ Indeed, some authors argue that the capitalist accumulation process (and the concomitant processes of “modernization”) can only take place on the basis of colonial violence exercised by the center against the periphery: nature, peoples submitted to domination, and women. That is the approach taken by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva in many works. See Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

critical authors in the Western tradition, we have enshrined a doctrine under which individuals are the ultimate judges of their desires, which in turn are regarded as separate from the responsibility and consequences they entail for others. Such doctrine is far from harmless. If we add the influence of over-developed and omnipresent advertising, focusing on the importance of constantly renewing and replacing our material goods, we find ourselves immersed in a socially and ecologically dangerous network. As a result of this process of individualization pushed to paroxysm, problems which respond to structural processes much more complex than individual choices are also individualized. Thus, in a social network where *winners* are convinced that they are entitled to their privileged situation (although in most cases their fortune and opportunities are mainly due to the random luck of the place and family where they were born), and *losers* are blamed for not trying hard enough or for their bad decisions, it is not hard to see why responsibility is diluted or transferred to others. The consequences for ecosystems and future generations arising from these attitudes disconnected from their implications with the technological development of the post-industrial era are huge.

Günther Anders implied something similar when he said that our time was fundamentally defined by a *Promethean discrepancy*, understood as a gap between humans and their products. Human beings have become unable to assimilate emotionally and intellectually part of the consequences of their own actions. It is as if the world of creations –including human ability to create and destroy– had exceeded our capacity to take charge. Faced with this discrepancy, it is urgent that we explore the path of “moral stretching exercises” suggested by Anders.¹⁹ Hans Jonas was certainly one of the authors

¹⁹ The term was coined by Günther Anders. See, among others, Günther Anders, *Filosofía de la situación*, ed. César de Vicente Hernando (Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 2007), 72.

who placed most emphasis on the need to extend responsibility and ethics in view of the evolution of modern technology. Jonas claimed that, given the kind of human actions rendered possible by modern technology (and hence, the unprecedented reach of their repercussions), the scope of moral obligations and responsibility to others had to be consequently extended: “[W]ith certain developments of our powers the nature of human action has changed, and, since ethics is concerned with action, it should follow that the changed nature of human action calls for a change in ethics as well.”²⁰

TEN TENETS FOR A POLIETHICS OF ENHANCED RESPONSIBILITY

In order to enable such extension of responsibility, *facilitating inclusion and generating proximity* seems to be the primary moral task. That is the logical corollary of Bauman’s consideration that *morality is about commitment to the other*.²¹ In this regard, a *poliethics of responsibility* could be the ideal framework to address an era of far-reaching ethics where the consequences of actions extend over time and space. By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest ten tenets that could serve as a basis for the poliethics of responsibility advocated in this work. They are structured in two ecological imperatives and eight guiding principles (drawing partially on Schmid’s and Riechmann’s proposals):

1. Act in such a way that you do not undermine the bases of your own existence.²²

²⁰ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1.

²¹ Zygmunt Bauman and Keith Tester, *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 12.

²² Wilhelm Schmid, *El arte de vivir ecológico*, trans. Carmen Plaza Vázquez and Ana Rosa Calero Valera (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2011), 70.

2. Act in such a way that you take into consideration the consequences of your actions for others, as you would expect that from them.²³
3. *Principle of fairness*: to tackle the problem of global inequality.
4. *Principle of democracy*: to address the lack of democracy affecting different levels of social, economic and political organization within a society. Faced with authoritarian temptations allegedly justified by the ecological urgency (eco-fascist and eco-authoritarian proposals), democracy and participation must be confirmed at the core of any socio-ecological transformation.
5. *Principle of precedence*: to accord priority to human needs over wants. Rooted in the equal moral worth of all human beings, it recognizes human needs as essential conditions for a good life (according to each one's particular realization). In the event of conflict, needs should take precedence over wants.
6. *Precautionary principle*: to tackle the Faustian problem associated with the uncritical global expansion of techno-science to multiple spheres of life. The implicit warning contained in this principle is far from opposing all technological or scientific innovation. It encourages a cautious approach to weigh the convenience of incorporating certain techno-scientific developments to society, taking into account their foreseeable effects and assuming high levels of uncertainty with respect to other potential consequences.
7. *Principle of eco-efficiency*: as a response to the problem of inefficiency in the use of energy and resources, a pressing matter in a finite planet with limited resources. In order to determine and assume our responsibility to the other

²³ Wilhelm Schmid, *El arte de vivir ecológico*, trans. Carmen Plaza Vázquez and Ana Rosa Calero Valera (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2011), 71.

members of the moral community, eco-efficiency should be integrated as a key priority.

8. *Principle of biomimicry*: as a solution to the problem of how to fit the technosphere (the world of human creations: institutional, cultural, technological) into the ecosphere. Faced with this “design problem”,²⁴ and in the light of the discrepancy between socioeconomic and ecological systems, the former should be redefined. Emulating nature’s patterns and strategies in the reconfiguration of human systems could trigger self-restrain mechanisms. Regeneration should also be acknowledged as a basic element in any healthy cycle.
9. *Harm principle*: conceived as a limit to freedom –in the sense of autonomy within a moral community. It retrieves John Stuart Mill’s harm principle, according to which a person’s liberty can be restricted only for the sake of preventing harm to others.²⁵ From the perspective of ecological ethics, the harm principle (regarded not as a single or absolute principle) would also cover the needs and interests of others. As a logical corollary of this principle, we should take into account the interests of future generations in our decision-making processes.

²⁴ The term “design problem” has been used in socialist thinking to refer to the lack of appropriate institutional design to implement a socialist alternative to capitalism. Among others, Gerald Cohen employs it in this sense in the chapter “¿Por qué no el socialismo?” in *Razones para el socialismo*, ed. Roberto Gargarella and Félix Ovejero, trans. Luciana Sánchez, Roberto Gargarella, Félix Ovejero and Verónica Lifrieri (Barcelona: Paidós, 2001), 78.

²⁵ The classic formulation can be read in John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 15.

10. *Principle of self-limitation*: as a response to overshoot, that is, the fact that our planet is ecologically overwhelmed. The demand for energy, materials and resources is simply unsustainable at all levels, from individual to collective consumption, both public and private.

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