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Institute of Philosophy
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STUDIA ECOLOGIAE ET BIOETHICAE



20/3 (2022)

Ecosystem Understanding of the City-Human Being Relationship

Ekosystemowe rozumienie relacji miasto – człowiek

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Received: 06 Sep, 2022; Revised: 12 Oct, 2022; Accepted: 17 Oct, 2022

Abstract: This paper presents the ecosystem understanding of the city-human being relationship. The author makes use of the paradigm of the ecosystem relationship in order to understand the city and human being as elements of the cultural and natural system. The concept of the ecosystem relationship, as defined by Edgar Morin, the French theoretician of complexity, plays an important role here. The paradigm of the ecosystem relationship makes us realize the complexity of dependencies in the dynamic, open and relatively isolated system of activity. Morin was inspired by Erwin Schrödinger's discovery that the ecosystem co-organizes and takes part in the programming of the organisms within it. The social and natural system is the second crucial notion in this paper. It was coined as a result of interdisciplinary research conducted by Józef Marcelego Dołęga, the founder of the Polish school of humanistic ecology and systemic sociology. The concept of transgression is yet another one important in my work. The term "transgressive man" was coined by Józef Koziński, a psychologist. Having understood transgression, we may see that man is capable of bestowing his presence on the present, future and past. The paradigm of the ecosystem relationship allows us to understand that a subject may direct its actions not only toward what is but also toward what may or should be. The conclusion is that we, as elements of the cultural and natural ecosystem, may enrich the city when we become part of it. Moreover, we may enrich ourselves when the city becomes part of our space.

Keywords: the ecosystem relationship, the cultural and natural ecosystem, city, human being, universal values

Streszczenie: Tematem opracowania jest ekosystemowe rozumienie relacji miasto – człowiek. Celem rozważań uczyniono wykorzystanie schematu relacji ekosystemowej do zrozumienia miasta i człowieka jako elementów systemu kulturowo-przyrodniczego. Ważne w przedstawionych rozważaniach jest zdefiniowane przez francuskiego teoretyka złożoności Edgara Morin pojęcie relacji ekosystemowej. Schemat relacji ekosystemowej, uświadamia złożoność zależności w dynamicznym, otwartym, względnie izolowanym systemie aktywności. Morin odkrył schemat relacji ekosystemowej inspirowany się spostrzeżeniem Erwina Schrodingera, że ekosystem współorganizuje i bierze udział w programowaniu należących do niego organizmów. Drugim ważnym pojęciem w zaproponowanej refleksji jest system społeczno-przyrodniczy. Jest ono rezultatem interdyscyplinarnych badań prowadzonych przez twórcę polskiej szkoły ekologii humanistycznej i socjologii systemowej Józefa Marcelego Dołęgę. Inspiruje do myślenia w kontekście podjętego problemu także pojęcie transgresji. To pojęcie znajdujemy w koncepcji człowieka transgresyjnego, której autorem jest psycholog Józef Koziński. Zrozumienie specyfiki transgresji pomaga zauważyć, że człowiek może obdarowywać swoją obecnością zarówno teraźniejszość, przyszłość jak i przeszłość. Schemat relacji ekosystemowej pomaga zrozumieć, że podmiot może ukierunkowywać swoją aktywność nie tylko na to, co jest, ale także na to, co może być lub być powinno. Artykuł kończy wniosek, że będąc elementem ekosystemu kulturowo-przyrodniczego człowiek może wzbogacać miasto stając się jego częścią. Może też wzbogacać siebie, gdy miasto staje się częścią jego przestrzeni.

Słowa kluczowe: relacja ekosystemowa, ekosystem kulturowo-przyrodniczy, miasto, człowiek, wartości uniwersalne

Introduction

In the 21st century, opportunities and threats that flow from our surrounding seem to overwhelm us. We may notice the lack of equilibrium between the level of civilization and the level of culture. We cannot make wise use of tools that should help us fight for survival, help us sustain life in its biological and social dimension. Due to culture, we discover values; from the perspective of ethics, we can discern and understand the opportunities that come with civilization; we can wisely use our own subjectivity. Moreover, we may consciously and responsibly influence the ecosystems of nature and the ecosystems of social presence. We may seek to understand knowledge and paradigms of thinking. We may reach out for the ecosystem paradigm and comprehend the possibility to discern opportunities and threats in the world pulsing with life. The paradigm of connections in the ecosystem relationship makes it possible to see the complexity of dependencies around us – in the dynamic, open and relatively isolated system. This helps us relinquish the city-nature dichotomy, and consider the city and man as elements of the cultural and natural system. Edgar Morin, the French theoretician of complexity, sociologist and political scientist, stresses the importance of the new understanding of relationship in perceiving and interpreting reality. While studying the phenomenon of complexity, he emphasizes the significance of transdisciplinarity, emergence and dialogue which may result in synergy that makes it possible for transgression to occur (Morin 1982). The concept of transgression appears in various theoretical contexts.¹ Józef Koziellecki developed a new current in psychology called psychological transgressionism where the transgressive

man is a multi-dimensional being capable of overcoming the material, social and symbolic boundaries (Koziellecki 1987; 1988). Such a concept of man agrees with the paradigm of ecosystem thinking.

According to Koziellecki, transgression means that we intentionally overcome what we are and what we possess. What is more, this overcoming contains within it what is being overcome. Thus, it is not leaving something behind, but broadening. This is valuable in a situation that inspires us to be loyal to the past and future. Transgression helps us enrich our activity systems, bring life to them.

The paradigm of ecosystem dependencies allows us to understand phenomena which cannot be understood simply as a sum of their components. Morin stresses that while seeking the truth we discover such emergent phenomena. Morin finds the following assertion by Erwin Schrodinger: the ecosystem co-organizes and takes part in programming the organisms within it (Schrodinger 1998). While stressing the theoretical consequences of this assertion, Morin claims that the ecosystem relationship is not an external relation of two separate beings: there is interaction between two open systems here each of which is a whole and at the same time part of the other whole (Morin 1977, 46).

This paradigm of relationship helps us understand complex dependencies between systems into which man's surrounding is ordered. Also, it helps us understand this surrounding. With this paradigm in mind, we can answer the question why our understanding of the components of a phenomenon does not necessarily lead to understanding the phenomenon itself. Perhaps it is because we have assumed that an entity is a set of "elements" (component parts) and not a potentiality that actualizes itself as a response to the "touch" of the cognizing man.

¹ Transgression in geology is a natural process that involves the rising of water level in the oceans. In genetics, transgression means a formation of extreme phenotypes in the offspring compared to phenotypes observed in the parental lines (this is used in crossbreeding of plants and animals). Transgression is also an important notion in social science and the humanities.

1. Overcoming the City - Nature Dichotomy in the Ecosystem Understanding of Man

With the ecosystem relationship in mind, we may propose the notion of the environment which refers not only to our natural surroundings. The concept was introduced by Fr Józef Marceł Dołęga, a philosopher and the founder of the Polish school of humanistic ecology and systems zoology. As a result of transdisciplinary studies, he coined the notion of the social and natural environment (Dołęga 1998; 2001). Man is understood here as not only a biological being but one that takes part in various dimensions of reality. The concept of the transgressive man and the complex concept of the environment with the dimension of time and space help pose adequate questions so that we can discover the ways in which the city and man may impact each other and be a gift one to another.

Understanding the city-human being relationship within ecosystem dependencies allows us to overcome the city-human dichotomy which has remained in effect since antiquity. It is analogous to the juxtaposition of nature and culture. What is natural, what came into being without human intervention has been contrasted with the results of human actions. According to Aristotle, man has a rational soul and as such is capable of understanding the dependencies in the cosmos as well as learning how to use them. Knowing these rules, we can build space that is ordered and comprehensible e.g. a city. We could feel secure in a city in which we could plan our activity and carry it out effectively. Incomprehensible forces of nature that filled one with a sense of awe remained outside the city, in nature. Encounters with these forces were "facilitated" by religion and magic. They were possible and required as they made it possible to experience forces that were impossible to comprehend. However, man could get to know them and use their power. As a result, the belief, established in ancient Greece, that security comes only with what may be part of man's understanding, became less evident.

2. Overcoming the Opposition: Conditions and Sovereignty of the Subject

In the modern paradigm of thinking, dependencies started to be understood in a linear, one-way paradigm: "active subject" vs. "passive object." This paradigm brings along a new opposition: the notion of conditioning is in the foreground, contrasted with the sovereignty of the subject. Here, the idea "either sovereignty or conditioning" becomes obvious and the concern for subjectivity (which guarantees the possibility of being safe) is identified with evading conditioning.

The ancient juxtaposition of man and nature resulted in the division of space into "safe within the city" and "threatening outside the city." In order to feel secure, the modern, autonomous man closes in on himself. He perceives contacts with others as a menace to his subjectivity. The notion of "the relatively isolated system" introduced by Roman Ingarden in his search for ontical grounds of responsibility helps to tackle this problem. "The relatively isolated system" reaches out to the environment, gives feedback to its signals, chances and threats, and yet the source of its activity is within it (Ingarden 1972).

An interesting inspiration for the positive understanding of dependence may be found in John Paul II's *Letter to Families* (John Paul II 1994). The Pope writes that if we, as persons, adhere to the antagonizing way of understanding dependencies, we will experience solitude of our "self-awareness" and "self-determination" while realizing our subjectivity. The Pope points out that this experience may be overcome by the communion of persons, *communio personarum*, a union rooted in love (John Paul II 1994, no. 7-8). While writing about the dependencies and opportunities within a family, the Pope suggests that we are capable of overcoming our self-enclosure which is the outcome of reductionism and exaggerated self-centeredness. This liberation is necessary as it makes it possible for the subject to reach out to the surroundings, with their challenges and inspirations. The liberation is also

instrumental for the surroundings: thus the subject may bestow on it its being. Such encounters enable dialogue and inspire the activity of the subject. When encounters occur within the eco-system relationship, the result is the synergy of the spaces which meet.

3. Man's Presence and its Traces

Man brings into existence various works that become traces of his being. "The trace" is an ontological notion that draws our attention to something that we do not have direct access to. The trace refers to what is not here or now, it inspires to transcend the here and now. It makes us realize the existence of reality which is different to the one we are in at present. If we do not reduce it to a mere "sign" which informs, we may discover that the trace has depth from which it is worth drawing.

In her book *Ślad i obecność*, Barbara Skarga writes: "The whole history is nothing else than reading traces. And what is science if not an attempt at revealing the causes of phenomena that have left traces in the shape of this or that event which one can observe? Everything is a trace of what is already gone. What we deal with is merely traces – the presence eludes us." (Skarga 2002, 73). Is the trace a form of presence in the sense of the French *être présent*? Due to the traces left by the presence, the latter may be – to some extent – available even when its source disappears (which we hear in the anonymous *il y a*).

In order to make the most of traces, one must be aware of the continuity of time and space as well as how to "navigate" in various dimensions of reality. The trace refers us to presence that has passed. It makes it possible for us to discover the past and the presence that occurred in it. The trace helps us predict the possibility of events and encounters. As such, it influences the future. The trace may occur because the present, the past and the future are interrelated.

In the culture of thinking ordered by the metaphor grounded in the concept of the ecosystem, the transcendent dimension of

reality and the classical definition of truth still hold water. The whole dimension of time is sustained while the perspective of the interim is substituted with the perspective of continuance in which the present is rooted in the past and can give life to the future. Traces left in the urban landscape prompt us to pose questions that lead towards the discovery of truth about man and the world he has created.

The notion of image may help us understand landscape and its value. An image is an object as perceived. Wolfgang Welsch thinks that the duration of an image which is visible makes it possible for us to perceive it many times and, moreover, to control it. He finds it disturbing: "Perception puts things 'at bay' and holds them in place. Perception is a sense that objectifies: the world perceived becomes the world of objects" (Welsch 2001, 67). Welsch emphasizes that perception which "is capable of checking and examining things continuously" orders and subjugates the world (Welsch 2001, 67). Welsch's emphasis of the subjective conditions of an image goes hand in hand with the fear of permanency and longing for "the aesthetics of disappearance" present in the metaphor of hearing. This longing is accompanied by the renouncement of the classical perspective of truth.

With the suspension of the classical notion of truth, reality becomes a positive universe of facts which need not be true. Thus, the distinction between falsity and truth is no longer in force, and so is the division into what is apparent and what is real. Man, the creator of such a world devoid of transcendence and truth, endeavours to save the life of reality by constant denial of this reality. As a result, man thinks, evaluates and acts in the light of the interim. An image seems to him/her dangerous and threatening to the dynamics of the reality precisely because it "lasts" and holds in objects the events and "materialized" activity of man. In the culture of the interim, images are replaced by signs. A sign has no depth, it neither gives food for thought, nor opens us to the truth. It merely

informs that one who sees it should act in a specified way.

The situation is quite different in the culture that arises from reflection shaped by the metaphor grounded in the notion of the ecosystem. Both transcendence and the classical definition of truth are not discarded here. The whole dimension of time is preserved while the perspective of the interim is substituted with the perspective of continuance. An image contained in the landscape takes us beyond time.

While thinking in the ecological paradigm we may discover that culture is a living system with its dynamics shaped by ideas that people have considered important, and ordered by major metaphors (e.g., the metaphor of Logos in ancient Greece, the metaphor of light in Middle Ages or the metaphor of the machine in the early to mid-20th century). The metaphor of the ecosystem, more and more broadly used, is an opportunity to “make a change” in the European culture. Also, to find the right response to – what Francis George Steiner, an American philosopher, literary critic, essayist and novelist, called a catastrophe that swept through the European and Slavic civilization (Steiner 2004). These catastrophic events contributed to the term “civilization of death” gaining currency.

Traces that are worth drawing from are: landscapes, academic works, works of art and notions. The concepts “civilization of love” and “civilization of death” are also traces. The term “civilization of death” was introduced into the European discourse by Pope John Paul II. He wrote about the related phenomena in the encyclicals: *Veritatis splendor* (John Paul II 1993) and *Evangelium vitae* (John Paul II 1995). The term is an antonym for “the civilization of love” coined by Pope VI who wrote about the necessity to realize this kind of civilization in his encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (Paul VI 1964). The reforms undertaken by Pope Paul VI concerned the humanization of the world. He used the term “civilization of love” for the first time in 1970, in his speech after the prayer *Regina*

coeli on Pentecost Sunday. The Pope emphasized the universal character of the dissent of the Holy Spirit which united all men into one family of God’s children and gave rise to the civilization of love and peace. Paul VI was the first Bishop of Rome to visit the New York headquarters of UN in 1965 and give a speech on peace, justice and security in the world. In 1967 he established the World Day of Peace which, since 1968, has been held on January 1st. The Pope spoke of the civilization of love as the program of renewal, the restoration of human life through love. He stated that at this moment in time, this is the duty of every Christian and every man in general who cares about the renewal of the world so that it may be true and beautiful. In his *Letter to Families*, Pope John Paul II elaborated on the specifics and significance of the relationship of love. He did not use the term “ecosystem relationship,” though the communion he described as essential for the life of the union, is of the same paradigm (John Paul II 1994, no 7-8).

John Paul II’s concept of “the civilization of death” reflects people’s attitude towards life which manifests itself as: accepting or even promoting abortion, euthanasia, contraception and in vitro fertilization as well as justifying and disregarding murders and genocide. In order to find a wise solution to the threats and opportunities of the 21st century, we must learn how to introduce the ecological harmony of space.

Space should not be treated in an object-like manner. Those who have understood the specifics of the ecosystem relationship should turn our space into a subject, that is an open and relatively isolated system. Such a system is in touch with what is outside but has the source of its activity within itself. As a result, it does not re-act but responds to the challenges and chances that come from the outside. While entering into relationships with surroundings, a subject experiences the potentiality of being. It discovers that being is not a set of elements but potentiality which actualizes itself in encounters. Encounters that result

in synergy are especially valuable. When spaces bestow their being on each other, their potentialities may be realized. In the ecological harmony spaces live and remain in ecosystem dependencies.

Conclusion

The ecosystem relationship helps us understand the city and man as elements of the cultural and natural system. It also makes us realize the complexity of dependencies within the dynamic, open and relatively isolated system of activity. Thinking within the ecosystem paradigm leads us to discovering new ways of understanding encounter and synergistic dialogue which are crucial when designing man's activity. It also helps us understand the character of the subject as a relatively isolated system which is capable of overcoming the boundaries of the present, and of transgressing. Thanks to universal values, that is values which are important for any activity system if it is to last, such a subject is capable of directing its activity not only towards what is but also towards what may be or ought to be. Being part of the cultural and natural ecosystem, we may enrich the city, its past, present and future. We may also enrich ourselves when the city becomes part of our space.

In *The Conflict in Modern Culture* George Simmel (1858-1918) wrote that each era has its central concept "from which intellectual currents arise and to which, as it were, they return" (Simmel 2007, 56). In the 18th century, it was the notion of reason which emphasized what is timeless; in the 19th century it was the notion of development which stressed the incessant growth. At the turn of the 19th and 20th century the central concept was "life" perceived as demonic and unconsciously creative. In the 21st century the understanding of life has changed and, as a result, it has become pivotal in the ecosystem thinking. Now it is understood as the open system of sustainable activity. It resonates with the following notions: relatively isolated system, sustainability, transgression,

creative continuance, mystery, hope, subjectivity and universal values.

Philosophers as well as practitioners face the challenge of making wise use of the potentiality of these concepts.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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