Thought and conscience
In search of the root of the ecological problem

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With its hyper-capacity for adjustment mankind has become, paradoxically, one of the species most deeply disconnected from its environment. It has transformed this at will, creating a conflict that, taken to extremes, could represent the very destruction of the species.

Clearly one of the most outstanding human qualities is the ability to adapt its environment to the point in which this ceases to be a habitat and becomes an instrument at its disposal. Let us think for a moment about one of our most remote ancestors thousands of years ago: a stone detaches itself from a hillside and rolls down landing at his feet revealing a sharp edge as it breaks in two. Our ancestor picks it up and at that exact moment, as if by magic, the rock ceases to be a rock and transforms itself into a tool. Its use is engrained in the object, equipping it with a symbolic role that distinguishes it from other things. This movement only occurs in the mind of our human: the rock is still a rock, the blade a simple excision arising from the mechanical action of the collision.

But for our human, that object takes on a new meaning at the same time as he appropriates it: it belongs to him; he has given it sense. However, this appropriation is the start of the separation, of the distancing: I am no longer a being that forms part of the world—a being that is the world, but I am in this world but I am not of it (John 8, 21-30).

By being aware of «things» I see myself as a reality that is separated from them.

This instrumental vision has gone, leaving an indelible imprint on our conscience over the millennia and is perfectly embodied through language with terms such as «natural resources» and its «development». This utilitarian attitude has arisen from some environmental conditions of evident overdevelopment.

But let us return to the root of the problem: it is not possible to know an organism that is detached from its environment, as proposed by both ecology and science; both concepts are intimately linked to the extent that one does not have meaning without the other. Thus, environment and the organism are a reality formed by interdependent elements. The exception to this proposal would be the case of man who sees himself as something different to his environment. The ecological conflict is, however, a strictly human problem in whose roots is to be found the abovementioned idea of being in this world but not of it.

The idea of living in a symbolic reality has been upheld since Ancient Times, with different variables and interpretations, but with one point in common that is none other than this dual concept of the world based on the idea of the «other». In this way and through different eras and cultures, examples of this model of thinking repeatedly appear. From the Allegory of the Cave by Plato, in which the perceived reality is compared to a shadow theater, to the idealism from the age of Hegel, in which the Mystical Chorus from Faust by Goethe pronounces: «All that is transient is but a likeness». Equally descriptive is the oracle at the Temple of Delphi who exhorts us with the mandate to «discover yourself». That «I» that we have to discover is no more and no less that fact that makes us different from all others; it is the ultimate symbolic objectification, where we split ourselves into the object of knowledge and the knowledgeable subject.

Thus the expressions «save the planet» or «environmental awareness» are nothing more than a new demonstration of this concept of the world in which we see ourselves as a reality that is largely on the fringes. By wanting to save our environment we place ourselves outside it and at the same time, we see it as something that belongs to us but which is not «I»; the implicit trust in that possibility of salvation through specific actions also reveals a mechanized way of seeing the world where that which has been broken can be restored so that it once again works as before. Along these lines, the proposal offered by Le Corbusier regarding the house as a «machine for living» rings true.
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By establishing this principle, the crow-like father of modern architecture reduces mankind to the rank of the living machine. Architecture becomes a metaphysical activity, the house is a shell, a microclimate that protects us from the outside world so that we can engage in our singular existence; a tree is thought of as natural but a wooden beam is not, a cave is natural, but a house is not.

There is an underlying basis that is looked down on by the earthly, the tangible, as it belongs to a strata that is inferior to the human, the greater, the spiritual. The belief that the transient is a symbol places the world of ideas on a higher plane of perfection. A complex system of crossed references is developed in such a way that for example, the vehicle in which we drive around is much more than a tool for mobility and achieves the rank of a mirror on our identity, our tastes and our social position. The brand creators are all too well aware of this and their fundamental work consists in providing businesses, products, institutions or even countries with content and symbolism. The so-called brand culture is established as a melting pot of tangible, emotional and cultural assets that sets into motion a dialogue with a high dose of abstraction but that is effective in its aims, so much so that it connects with the model for universal thought. The merely functional efficiency contained in the old assertion that ‘form follows function’ means an aspiration to considerable ingenuity and blindness in such an environment.

We have reached a point in which the world surrounding us now not only has become an instrument for us to use for ourselves but has gone yet further. This reality has gradually lost its tangible character to transform itself into a complex framework of symbols that refer to extremely sophisticated mental realities. In this way the very symbolic nature of daily language presents clear evidence. It is worth stopping to think about the way in which we refer to ‘our own image’, the way in which we talk about ourselves as bearers of an image, a sort of screen, a mask in the style of the characters in the Greek Theater. That image that we have to ‘cultivate’, to ‘project’, is something that we have adopted but it is not us. Similarly, we say that ‘we have’ a body as Alan Watts so brilliantly explained in his conversations on ecology and religion, in which he described mankind as ‘a skin-encapsulated ego’, in addition to affirming that we have to take care of nature without admitting that ‘we are’ nature.

To conclude, it can be said that, in view of the above, the problems arising from our behavior are rooted in our beliefs regarding the world, ourselves and our role within this reality. The structural model of thought that has made us flourish over the rest of the species is also something that disconnects us from an environment of which we form an integral part but of which we feel considerably alien. However, we do have to look for solutions. These necessarily become new behaviors arising from different models of thought, where the first step should lean towards breaking this strong mental separation between the ‘I’ and everything else.