



Life's potentiality as multispecies gift

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ABSTRACT: Contemporary political ecological problems reduce possibilities for future human and non-human life. These problems are the result of modern capitalist humans' attempt to break away from multispecies bonds and turn non-humans into resources to be appropriated. These bonds are crucial for the continued generation of life, which can only result from intergenerational and interspecies shared time, effort, and energy. By expanding the works of Mauss' intellectual heirs and Levinas towards multispecies interactions, this gift of life can be better understood. Life received by newborn humans entangles them in a multispecies gift cycle that obligates them to reciprocate the gift of life's potentiality. This requires acknowledging humans' ethical responsibilities for all others, human and non-human, currently alive or potentially born in the future. In turn, this responsibility can only unfold as political ecologically sustainable actions that keep multispecies communities healthy enough to keep giving life's potentiality to future generations.

KEY WORDS: Gift · Multispecies communities · Ethics · Life · Future · Potentiality

'There's no better present than a future'
— Death in Terry Pratchett's, *Hogfather*

1. INTRODUCTION

For any kind of worthwhile existence to be possible, each newborn must first receive the gift of life from the multispecies communities to which he¹ belongs. Receiving life makes the newborn responsible for ensuring that the same gift can keep on being given to others. Currently, however, the conditions of possibility for this continued giving of life appear to be shrinking due to climate change, accelerated extinction of species, and other political ecological prob-

lems. These fundamentally condition how humans and non-humans will be able to live in the near and distant future, with more catastrophic predictions pointing to severe vital constraints for most individuals of most species.

These problems result from the ways in which humans interact with non-humans in capitalist modernity (Rose 2005, 2008, 2011, 2012a,b, van Dooren 2014, 2019, Haraway, 2015, Moore 2015, 2016, Wallace 2016, Patel & Moore 2017, Tsing 2017, 2019, Aldeia & Alves 2019, Haraway et al. 2019, Aldeia 2022, 2023, 2024), which is far more than merely an economic model. Capitalist modernity is a political ecological system that started in the long 16th century with European colonialism (Dussel 1995, Mignolo 1995, 2000, Quijano 2005, 2007, 2009, Moore 2009, 2010, 2015, Patel & Moore 2017). Although there have been experiences of modernity with different economic rationalities, such as communism, these have not successfully broken away from capitalist modernity in terms of governmental rationality (Scott 1998,

¹To make the narrative flow better, I am using the male 'he' ('his', 'him') when referring to 'he/she' ('his/hers', 'him/her') and, from Section 3 onward, to refer to 'he/she/it' ('his/hers/its', 'him/her/it'), except when it is contextually understandable that I am just talking about humans.

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Foucault 2003, p. 261, 2004, p. 91–94). This has led purportedly communist societies to replicate (although not entirely without changes) the practices employed to dominate both humans and nature in assumedly capitalist societies (e.g. the commodification of nature, extractivism, ecological simplification, extensive bureaucratic administration, police and military violence, the surveillance and punishment of individuals, the scientific construction of normality and deviance). This is why Foucault argued that 'there is no autonomous socialist governmentality' (Foucault 2004, p. 92), i.e. the rationality 'intended to conduct men, to direct their conduct, to conduct their conduct' (Foucault 2014, p. 12), which involves appropriating and transforming nature, has mostly been the same in supposedly communist and capitalist societies.

In capitalist modernity, previous ways of interacting with other species and abiotic elements were profoundly transformed. Certain humans started understanding non-humans as resources that could be instrumentally used or destroyed for their well-being. This entailed developing forms of mastery over non-humans (Plumwood 1993, Serres 1998) that changed how multispecies bonds are conceived.

Contrary to the homogeneous humanity that collectively became an actor of geological magnitude postulated by mainstream narratives on the Anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoermer 2000, Steffen et al. 2007), current political ecological problems are the result of the historical action of specific human categories (Chakrabarty 2009, Haraway 2015, Moore 2015, 2016, Patel & Moore 2017, Aldeia & Alves 2019, Haraway et al. 2019, Aldeia 2022, 2023, 2024). Hence, *Anthropos* is most definitively not shorthand for 'humanity'. Rather, it is Western, middle class or elite, property owner or manager, male and white. Its privileged cosmology is modern technoscience, which enables humans who fall into the previous categories to (try to) become the 'masters and possessors of nature' (Descartes 2006, p. 51).

Mastery unfolds by refusing to recognize that non-humans give their efforts, time, and energy to other individuals of their own species, as well as of others, humanity included (Rose 2005, 2008, 2011, 2012a, van Dooren 2014, 2019). Their gifts became comprehensible solely as politically and ethically neutral natural activities that can be mastered and appropriated by certain humans. Thus, Cartesian Utilitarianism expelled non-humans from both the world of the gift (Godbout & Caillé 1998, Caillé 2000, Godbout 2000, Mauss 2016) and the realm of ethical obligations (Levinas 1991, 1998, 2007). This obscured both what

humans receive from non-humans and their responsibility for them.

This refusal of ethical or political bonds with non-humans is concomitant with the refusal of fundamental responsibility for future human generations. The predictable decrease of potential future humans' conditions of vital possibility is inextricable from the damages inflicted upon non-humans. The 2 problems can only be understood and overcome by tackling them together.

Given the gravity of our present situation, the fight against Cartesianism and Utilitarianism has become urgent. One of the crucial moments of this fight requires looking at the obligations that bind individuals across species to understand how human responsibility for the other, both human and non-human, has mostly gone unfulfilled in capitalist modernity.

It is beside the point whether non-humans have obligations towards humans. It suffices to acknowledge that when I receive something from a non-human being or thing that enhances my life's conditions of possibility, I become ethically connected to — hence, responsible for — it. This is not intended to reinforce Cartesian human exceptionalism; rather, from a Levinasian standpoint (Levinas & Nemo 1985, Levinas 1991, 1998, 2007), it is entirely irrelevant to delve into the eventual ethical obligations of non-human others because ethics can only begin with my own responsibility for the other (Davy 2007, Crowe 2008, Atterton 2012).

I propose to contribute to the fight against Cartesianism and Utilitarianism by exploring 2 converging, but rarely articulated, theoretical heritages: the Maussian-inspired gift paradigm and Levinasian ethics. Both are anti-Utilitarian, but also anthropocentric bodies of work, although they can be productively expanded to take into account the roles played by non-humans. The gift and, mainly, the gift of oneself to others, is not inherently ethical, but it does have an ethical aspect. By discussing how this gift empirically involves different species that are tied in ethical ways I hope to show that the gift, both as an empirical fact and as an analytical paradigm, is one of the chief means by which capitalist modernity's violence and oppression can be opposed and overcome — pointing to the emancipation of both humans and non-humans.

The works of the authors of the gift and, particularly, that of Levinas (Levinas & Nemo 1985, Levinas 1991, 1998, 2007) do not come out entirely unscathed from the attempt to establish a dialogue between them and, mostly, from extending them to think about more-than-human life. I approach their works

following Foucault's suggestion for tackling Nietzsche: 'the only valid contribution to thought such as Nietzsche's is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest' (Foucault 1980, p. 53–54). The difficulty in this is doing it without deforming such thoughts in grotesque ways and rather, as I hope to have done, to make them productively go beyond what their authors might have (sometimes) intended.

Despite the anthropocentrism of Levinas' work, there are good reasons to discuss multispecies ethics in Levinasian terms, which I will do in Section 4 of this essay. 'The radically other-oriented position that Levinas articulates' (Edelglass et al. 2012, p. 5) allows ethics to be understood as a relational act of becoming totally responsible for the needs and suffering of the other, so responsible in fact that my own needs become irrelevant. Being confronted with the face of the other shows me just how unimportant I am and forces me to be for the other (Levinas & Nemo 1985, Levinas 1991, 1998, 2007). In the midst of modern capitalogenic attacks on life, which cross both species and generations, this understanding of ethics is just as important as it was in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Now as then, as Levinas made abundantly clear, ethics is beyond any choice that I might make: I am either responsible for the other and ethics remains, or I am not and ethics ends — and life's prospects become dim.

Although Levinas discusses ethics in anthropocentric terms, he leaves an important opening to extend it to multispecies relations: ethics comes before ontology (Levinas 1991, 2007). Whether or not this extension of ethics is according to Levinas' own will seems relatively unimportant. What matters is that the face of the other expresses need and suffering before any classification of the other is possible (Levinas 1966, 1991, 2007, Levinas & Nemo 1985, Davy 2007, p. 41 et passim, Edelglass et al. 2012, p. 6). By placing all responsibility on my shoulders, Levinas renders both the responsibility and the ontology of the other irrelevant for ethics. Pushing Levinasian ethics beyond the anthropocentrism of his work is not easily done, but the lack of importance that he places on the ontology of the other compared to my responsibility for him makes it possible to accept that the other, despite his need, need not be human. Levinas' work is anthropocentric without being Cartesian, which is of great help in fighting against Cartesianism and Utilitarianism. Not only is subjectivation unavoidably relational for Levinas (1991) (hence, no *ego cogito*), but 'Levinas's notion of anthropocentrism is not so much "centric" as accusative' (Edelglass et al. 2012, p. 5): it is less concerned with human ontological privilege than

it is with my ethical shortcomings, i.e. with the fact that my responsibility for the other always comes up short because I am totally responsible for him (Levinas & Nemo 1985, Levinas 1991, 1998, 2007).

All of this allows Levinasian ethics to be extended beyond the human in a way that does not change the most fundamental thing that ethics is for him: my responsibility for the other. This broadens the number and kind of those who can assume the role of the other. My responsibility remains infinite; those for whom I am responsible infinitely grow. It is difficult to see another way to tackle the damages suffered by all the living.

I will start by discussing how the fundamental gift of life's potentiality binds humans together. Then, I will look at some of the roles that non-humans play in this gift. Lastly, I will discuss how Levinasian ethics helps us to understand the gift of oneself to others and how the multispecies gift of life's potentiality makes humans responsible for both non-human others and potential future individuals.

2. THE GIFT OF LIFE'S POTENTIALITY

As Mauss (2016) pointed out in his seminal work, *L'essai sur le don*, the gift is a fundamental aspect of human sociability.² The gift is not a series of isolated acts of giving and receiving, but rather a system in which goods and services circulate to establish and maintain social bonds between its participants (Godbout & Caillé 1998, Caillé 2000, Godbout 2000, Portugal 2006, Mauss 2016). The gift entails 3 equally important, and frequently overlapping, moments: giving, receiving, and reciprocating (Mauss 2016). Although there is a degree of freedom, spontaneity, and uncertainty in the circulation of the gift, this continuous cycle of giving, receiving, and reciprocating obligates its participants to keep fostering bonds with each other (Godbout & Caillé 1998, Caillé 2000, Godbout 2000, Portugal 2006).

Giving, receiving, and reciprocating nourishes the bonds between those involved in the gift cycle because each gift is a deeply personal act. Much like Mauss (2016, p. 69–73) highlighted in his discussion of the Maori's *hau* that circulates inside each gift, when giving, each donor places a part of himself in what he gives, thus, he gives of himself to others. He gives to the direct recipient, to the bonds between

²Caillé (2000, p 27–44), Graeber (2001), Godbout (2004), and Martins (2005) provide stimulating interpretations of Mauss' text

them, and, indirectly, to the community of the gift as a whole (Aldeia 2017, Esposito 2008, p. 45–77, 2010, p. 3–19 et passim, 2011, p. 5–6 et passim). Such a gift can never be repaid, but it creates in each recipient an obligation to emulate the gesture by giving of themselves to others.

When an individual gives of himself to others he is participating in the performance of *munus*, the gift-obligation that creates communality (Esposito 2008, p. 45–77, 2010, p. 3–19 et passim, 2011, p. 5–6, 22 et seq.). By performing-giving *munus*, an individual is contributing to a continuous recreation of the community of which he is a part — a *communitas* that, as Esposito (2008, 2010, 2011; see above) highlights, etymologically juxtaposes *cum plus munus*, thus pointing to the political capacity of *munus*, this gift one is obligated to give, to create that which is common between those who perform-give it. *Munus* is, inherently, a gift of oneself — just as it is the obligation to give oneself — to the common.

For Esposito (2010), performing-giving *munus* always diminishes the individual (i.e. that which is, rigorously, proper) by transferring a part of him towards the common, thus deindividuating him to a degree. This is why community is not a thing, an essence, or a shared identity, but rather a shared expropriation of the proper towards the common. Community is a shared absence, a lack. However, respectfully arguing partly against Esposito, since gift-giving works to create bonds, giving-performing *munus* is precisely what enables the subject's existence. The subject emerges by being tied to others in indirectly reciprocal ways that enable both the common and the individual to emerge. Giving oneself to the common always diminishes the subject, but without the bonds that tie him to others no subjectivation would be possible. Performing an obligation to the community by giving — which is always already reciprocating — both maintains that community and creates conditions of possibility for what Elias (2000) called *homo aperti*, the unavoidably bonded individual, to come into being. The subjective reduction entailed by performing-giving *munus* is the only way the subject can emerge — in his permanently and unavoidably diminished form (Aldeia 2017).

Giving, receiving, and reciprocating are inextricable from obligation. Those who participate in the gift cycle enter into obligation as soon as they are born. They become obligated directly, towards their parents, but also indirectly, towards the whole gift-giving community. Birth immediately embeds them as recipients in a web of gift relations that precedes them, transcends them, and survives them. Life is, in a

sense, the 'definitive gift' (Godbout & Caillé 1998, p. 39) and it establishes an obligation that conditions each recipient throughout his life, pushing him to continue to foster the circulation of the gift by giving, receiving, and reciprocating, therefore holding the community together.

Although it involves obligation, the gift cannot be understood according to the market's logic of exchange. Contrary to what occurs in the market, participants in the gift cycle are never quits, at least not without leaving the logic of the gift for something else. When someone receives, he becomes obligated vis-à-vis the donor and, more fundamentally, to the community that the gift maintains. However, rather than seeking to pay back what was received to cancel participants' obligations to each other, reciprocating feeds their mutual obligation by functioning as yet another act of giving, which ensures that they remain bonded. Whereas the payment of a commercial debt effectively cancels any obligation that debtors and creditors had to each other, reciprocating a gift does not. Instead, it nourishes participants' bonds to each other and to the community as a whole. Their permanent obligation is unavoidable since ending it would fracture the ties that bind them (Godbout & Charbonneau 1993, Godbout & Caillé 1998, Caillé 2000, Godbout 2000, Portugal 2006, Aldeia 2014, 2017).

In the world of the gift, those who give, receive, and reciprocate are mutually obligated vis-à-vis many others, both known to them and unknown, both living and already dead. This is why the act of reciprocating both empirically overlaps that of giving and can be deferred to an unknown future. The gift does not require direct reciprocity, as a commercial relationship would,³ but can operate in an indirect, diffused, and deferred manner (Chabal 1996, Portugal 2006, p. 563–564 et passim, Aldeia 2014, 2017). Reciprocity is crucial for the gift, but it surpasses both giver and receiver. Rather, as giving, receiving, and reciprocating are ways of bonding, reciprocity is established over the whole length of the community of givers. I give today, but I might only receive in the future. Most fundamentally, it might not be the one to whom I gave that reciprocates, just as I might reciprocate by giving to someone other than the one from whom I received. As Chabal (1996, p. 139) argues:

'I give so that you give, but not necessarily to me. It might not even be you who will be giving, but an other who will

³Commercial debt requires a direct relationship between debtor and creditor, but one that is impersonal. This is what allows this debt to be bought and sold, changing the individual to whom the debtor in fact owes money (Graeber 2011)

give to another... A discontinuous, an apparently discontinuous, reciprocity, revealing hidden interactions, is discovered'

Although my gifts might create obligations in others, my own obligation is more important since it is what compels me to keep giving so that the community holds together.

Life is a monumental gift. However, the fundamental obligation created by the gift of life cannot be understood as a duty to repay one's ancestors directly; rather, the obligation contained in this gift is the duty to transfer it to others. Since receiving life comes with my obligation towards the whole gift-giving community, I can only reciprocate by ensuring that others might live — in their futures, much more than in my own.

What communities give to each individual is not life per se;⁴ rather, in the moment of birth, the newborn receives the potentiality of life and, contained within it, the potentiality of a good life. Life, however, has no guarantees. As Agamben (1998, p. 28, 44–47, 1999a,b) reminds us, potentiality (*dynamis*) 'is always also *dynamis mē energein*, the potentiality not to pass into actuality' (Agamben 1998, p. 28). Potentiality necessarily contains in itself both the capacity of being actualized and the capacity not to become actuality, as Agamben (1998, p. 45) states:

'if potentiality is to have its own consistency and not always disappear immediately into actuality, it is necessary that potentiality be able *not* to pass over into actuality, that potentiality constitutively be the *potentiality not to* (do or be), or, as Aristotle says, that potentiality be also im-potentiality (*adynamia*)'

Hence, what each community member receives is not a certainty of any kind, but rather the possibility that his existence might eventually be experienced as a good life. During an individual's existence, this potentiality can become actuality or remain impotence. In the latter case, life remains *zoē*, natural life associated with biological reproduction (Agamben 1998, Arendt 1998, p. 12–17, 28–37 et passim). However,

since the life received in the moment of birth contains the potentiality of a good life, it can also grow into multiple *bioi*, those forms of politically qualified life that are 'proper to an individual or group' (Agamben 1998, p. 1, see also Arendt 1998, p. 12–17 et passim, Aristotle 2009, p. 6–7).

Gifted life is this politically unrestricted offering of potentiality. However, this gift has been historically squandered. In capitalist modernity, but also in other human societal models with some kind of organized authority, (certain) humans' will to 'master and possess', to paraphrase Descartes (2006, p. 51), has actively constrained *bios*. In different ways according to time and place, humans have limited the unrestrained proliferation of politically qualified forms of life that could enable most humans to experience a good life. This has forced billions of human beings throughout history to experience their lives as mere *zoē*.

In itself, *zoē* is insufficient to guarantee any kind of good life. In Ancient Greece, *zoē* was not entirely without value since it was understood as the implicit support of all *bioi*. Relegated to the hidden space of the home (i.e. the *oikos*), *zoē* was the form of life that guaranteed individual and collective reproduction, thus making it possible for politically qualified forms of life to be experienced in the polis — by other individuals. This, however, inherently made *zoē* into a less valuable form of life than *bios* and a life entirely experienced as pure biology was regarded as not sufficiently worthy (Agamben 1998, Arendt 1998, p. 28 et seq.)

Zoē's incapacity to guarantee any sort of good life is particularly true in capitalist modernity. In this political ecological system, *zoē* is removed from the private sphere to which it originally belonged (the *oikos*) and becomes a public matter that must be bio-thanatopolitically governed in the polis (Agamben 1998, Arendt 1998, p. 38–49). When it is placed under the rule of bio-thanato-political practices, *zoē* fundamentally changes, its disqualification is enhanced, and it turns into 'bare life', a form of life that is absolutely exposed to arbitrary decisions that others make over the possibilities of one's existence (Agamben 1998). When bare life proliferates, the space reserved for *bios* — and also that reserved for pure *zoē* — shrinks drastically, reducing many humans to a political ontological nakedness that enables others to arbitrarily kill them without committing murder (Arendt 1958, p. 267–302, Agamben 1998). Thus, they are reduced to 'the abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human' (Arendt 1958, p. 297).

This annihilation of *bios* exposes life to all possible reductions. However, none of this denies the magni-

⁴Communitas itself gives life to its members insofar as the gift is a web of bonds that works beyond the dyad of giver and receiver, which makes each gift already the reciprocation of numerous others. This does not occur in the theistic way postulated by Structuralism. Gift is *communitas* — and *communitas* is webbed, not structured. The community gives by the unfolding of myriad specific acts of giving, carried out by particular individuals, both synchronically and diachronically. All of these culminate in the moment in which a specific mother gives birth — and then it keeps going due to the obligations that this bestows upon the newborn

tude of the life that is received at birth. In the instant of birth, community infuses life with the capacity of being something more than mere survival. Contained within this gift is the whole potentiality of life—of becoming mere biological survival or something worthwhile. What has been historically squandered is exactly what communities give humans, i.e. the potentiality of life and of living well.

3. MULTISPECIES GIFT

Mauss, most of the authors of MAUSS (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste en Sciences Sociales) that he influenced, and Esposito discuss the gift in anthropocentric ways. However, some of the members of MAUSS have been open to including non-humans in the gift cycle (Caillé et al. 2013, Chaniel 2013, Flipo 2013, Pierron 2013, Caillé 2019, p. 143–154). For Alain Caillé and his collaborators, humans and non-humans can give to and receive from each other, but only within an animist cosmology. Likewise, the study of these interspecies gifts requires 'methodological animism', the treatment of nature as a 'quasi-subject'. As they highlight, humans can only symbolically treat non-humans as participants in gift exchange under certain cultural conditions and understanding these cultural specificities is a crucial point for methodological animism (Caillé et al. 2013, Caillé 2019, p. 143–154).

The opening of the gift to more-than-human relationships by MAUSS is a stimulating work in progress that starts from the necessary recognition that the study of the gift is productively troubled by the expansion of the world of the gift (Caillé et al. 2013, Chaniel 2013, Caillé 2019, p. 143–154). After all, as Rose et al. (2012) argued, it is a good thing that *thinking through the environment* unsettles established fields of research. However, this version of methodological animism is not entirely satisfactory. For Caillé and other authors of MAUSS, non-humans can only be included in the gift cycle if they are metaphorically understood by humans as possessing human-like features (Caillé et al. 2013, Caillé 2019, p. 143–154). Hence, this methodological proposal does not sufficiently move away from anthropocentrism when considering nature's roles in the gift because it denies non-humans the possibility of acting on their own terms when giving, receiving and reciprocating. Requiring non-humans to be quasi-subjects on human-like terms curtails reciprocity between different, but inextricably connected, entities. Other methodologically animist proposals, such as

the 'ecological animism' of van Dooren & Rose (2016), do not have these pitfalls as they start from a methodological and ethical openness to heterogeneous forms of sociability that are other-than-human, even if they sometimes also include humans.

Contrary to what the authors of MAUSS argue, multispecies gift can be seen in the consequence of actions: if life-sustaining energy is transferred from a community member to another, then there is giving and receiving. Being human, and even possessing a form of human-like intentionality (to give, to receive, to reciprocate), is not *conditio sine qua non* for this to happen. Even when, in specific cosmologies, some humans do not treat non-humans as participants in gift exchange, life still only exists because energy is transferred between species (Rose 2012a, van Dooren 2014). Insofar as these energy exchanges are what nourish life—and what can create the conditions of possibility for this to be a good life—these are gifts with a fundamentally ethical aspect notwithstanding how they are culturally understood. Denying these acts as gift-giving and gift-receiving ontologically transforms them into something else (e.g. from gifts to ethically neutral bio-physical processes, as occurs in modern capitalist science), but this is premised on a fundamental misrecognition of the ways in which non-humans act—and, sometimes, act ethically.

Humans are not the only participants in the circulation of the gift (Rose 2008, 2011, 2012a, Lynch 2019, van Dooren 2019, p. 173–176, Aldeia 2022). Non-humans are not merely the background on which humans act—giving, receiving, and reciprocating; rather, they are active elements in this gift that, simultaneously, enables community and life. Taking ecological processes into account, it becomes untenable to assume that giving, receiving, and reciprocating could occur if these acts were solely a matter between humans. Any given human community is enmeshed in myriad interplays between different species, and even between biotic and abiotic elements—to a point in which each community is always a multispecies phenomenon (Rose 2005, 2008, 2011, 2012a,b, van Dooren 2014, 2019, p. 31–63 et passim, Tsing 2017, 2019, Aldeia 2022, 2023, 2024).

Individual members of a situated multispecies community are bound together through the activities that each of them carries out to guarantee both his own survival and that of others. With or without having it as an explicit goal, those performing these activities transfer their time, effort, and energy towards others of the same and of different species, even when carrying out the most apparently individualistic of tasks. This time, effort, and energy is seldom restricted to

those beings whose survival and/or well-being is envisioned, but rather overflows in myriad ways to nourish others that were not taken into account, of the same species as of others, living in coeval fashion as yet to be born (Rose 2008, 2011, 2012a, van Dooren 2014, 2019).

Rose (2012a) and van Dooren (2014) make it clear that experiences of life and death are connected both sequentially and synchronically. In situated interactions, each member of a given species is able to exist because he is the recipient of the millennia-old efforts of all the generations that came before—from the parents that birthed and nurtured him to his more distant ancestors, whose behavior and way of life contributed to shape his present-day genetic features and forms of sociability. Reciprocally, while his individual life lasts, the multiple activities that he carries on will benefit newer generations down the road. Inter-generational intra-species bonds are kept alive by this sequential gift of time, effort, and energy—in essence, of life.

However, this inter-generational vital movement cannot guarantee individual or collective life on its own. Alongside this movement, different individuals of different species are linked by synchronous interactions that tie them together in ways that allow what each one does to benefit several other species. Frugivorous animals spread plant seeds, making the latter species flourish and grow fruit upon which the former will feed. A predator kills a herbivore to feed, and the latter's uneaten remains nourish necrophage birds, bacteria, and worms, who enrich the soil, allowing plants to grow and feed other individuals of the same species as the dead one. Intentionally and not, these coeval bonds enable different individuals of different species to reciprocally support each other (Rose 2012a, van Dooren 2014).

By these interactions, individuals of different species maintain multispecies communality. They do this because all of them, human and non-human alike, are giving-performing munus. Esposito's work is essentially focused on interactions between humans (Wolfe 2013, Lynch 2019, Aldeia 2022). However, there is no reason to *a priori* deny that munus is a multispecies affair. This in no way denies interspecies difference; rather, it highlights the roles that each species plays in multispecies communality.

If one rejects Cartesian privilege and the logic of mastery that goes along with it (Plumwood 1993, Serres 1998), munus can be framed precisely as what binds different species together in a given community. Rose's (2012a) conceptualization of such communities as *multispecies knots of ethical time* highlights precisely this way of becoming together

through a shared gift—a gift that is not only beyond systematic thought but also one that each individual gives-performs because he must. What is the act of giving time, effort, energy—and also the entirety of oneself through one's physical death—besides the participation in a shared lack that holds multiple interconnected species together? Munus circulates between individuals of different generations of the same species, as well as between coeval individuals of the same and of other species as time, effort, and energy spent by each one in the daily activities by which he attempts to keep life going. Since the results of these activities overflow to benefit many others, currently alive or yet unborn, consciously taken into account or not, each individual is participating in the circulation of a gift that makes communality. Whether this gift is intended to make communality or makes it as an unthought-of consequence is reasonably irrelevant.

How can the efforts by which non-humans transfer energy to humans be understood if not as gifts? The norms that guide the gift are many times unthought, and almost always unsaid (Godbout & Caillé 1998, p. 186–190 et passim, Caillé 2000). Since giving, receiving, and reciprocating result from obligation, not systematic consideration, the intentions of those who are giving, receiving, or reciprocating are at best secondary to the central aspect of the gift: one participates in it because one is already the recipient of previous gifts and in doing so one feeds mutual obligation, hence the bonds, between participants. By giving to other individuals of their species and of others, including to humans, non-humans are contributing to keeping the gift of life going.

In many cosmologies other than Western Cartesian Utilitarianism it is easier to recognize the participation of non-humans in gift-giving, receiving, and reciprocating. Contrary to what occurs in Western capitalist modernity, nature occupies an almost parental position vis-à-vis the living beings that compose it. This is clear in the Andes, where, for Quechua and Aymara peoples, nature is Pachamama, a notion that gained public attention with its inclusion in article 71 of the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador, in which the rights of nature are established,⁵ and, since 2006, with the repeated appeals for the rights of Pachamama by members of Bolivian governments led by Evo Morales.⁶ As Burman explains, in Aymara cosmology, all things, whether they are humans or not, exist because they have *ajayu*, a spiritual energy that confers 'life, agency and subjectivity' (Burman 2017, p. 926). Some *ajayus* are, however, greater than others. The greatest *ajayus* are those of *achachilas* and *awichas*,

respectively, male and female ancestors or deities (Burman 2017). Although gender is more fluid in Quechua and Aymara cosmologies than it is in Western modernity, which makes the cultural translation of Pachamama into Mother Earth problematic (Tola 2018), Pachamama is the awicha associated with the Earth, just like Pacha Awki is the achachila associated with the cosmos (Burman 2017). Pachamama is, essentially, 'the vital energy that provides the condition of possibility for disparate beings' (Tola 2018, p. 35). Pachamama nurtures humans and non-humans, but it can also threaten human well-being and survival if humans wrong other humans or non-humans (Burman 2017, Tola 2018). For Pachamama to nurture human life (e.g. by giving a good harvest), humans have to live their lives in accordance to *sumak kawsay* (in Quechua) or *suma qamaña* (in Aymara), which has been popularized in the last decades in the Spanish formulation of *buen vivir/vivir bien*. Living in accordance to *suma qamaña* entails living in harmony with both other humans and non-humans, which in turn involves acknowledging that one is enmeshed in a gift cycle whose participants are not solely humans. Humans receive from and give to non-humans. As Burman tells us, 'according to Aymara shamans, (...) achachilas [and awichas] behave in accordance with Aymara notions of reciprocity and morality and the ritual practice of handing over offerings to them is a way of reinforcing reciprocal relations' (Burman 2017, p. 927).

The almost parental position of nature vis-à-vis the living is also clear in Australian Aboriginal people's cosmology, which is centered on multispecies balance (Rose 1996, p. 11 et passim). As Rose (1996, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2012a,b) extensively discussed, the notion

(and the lived experience) of 'country' occupies a central role in the lives of Aboriginal people. In her definition, 'country is a spatial unit — large enough to support a group of people, small enough to be intimately known in every detail, and home to the living things whose lives come and go in that place' (Rose 2011, p. 17). Country is composed of multispecies relationships of reciprocity. For Aboriginal people, different species (and also, in their ways, abiotic elements) are inherently interdependent and a country can only be healthy if all of them are respected. Country is a multispecies community that, in Rose's (1996) terminology, 'nourishes' all living beings within it. Aware of the myriad bonds of interdependency in which they are entangled, Aboriginal people place great importance in promoting a 'good country', which entails practices of multispecies care. Essentially, these relations of multispecies reciprocity involve giving to country and its non-human inhabitants, just like they involve receiving from them whatever conditions of possibility are needed for human life (Rose 1996, 2011, 2012a).

Other examples could be mentioned, such as the place of Silaap inua-Naarjuk, the giant baby, in Inuit cosmology. As Saladin d'Anglure's ethnographic work shows, for Inuit people, Naarjuk controls the gift cycle in which humans and non-humans participate. According to Saladin d'Anglure (2013, p. 129), Inuit people

'give (given gift: *tunijjuti*) and receive (received gift: *tunijjusiaq*) in a perennial, but fragile, gift-exchange process (*taursitug*) that works according to the rules created [*edictées*] and controlled by the master of the cosmos *Silaap inua-Naarjuk* (fat belly), in the shamanic language'

In Inuit cosmology, life is a gift given by Sila, the cosmos, and Nuna, the Earth, but it is Naarjuk who controls the reciprocal relations between living beings. The giant baby Naarjuk both gives life's conditions of possibility (e.g. health, food) and punishes humans when their behavior harms other humans or other living beings (Saladin d'Anglure 2013).

In cosmologies such as these, nature, which is simply shorthand for multispecies communities, is the original parental element that gives life to each human and non-human individual, to species (humanity included), and to the entire assemblage of living beings — thus, essentially, nature gives life to itself.⁷ This does not mean that nature cares for their well-being. Nature does not care about humans or anyone else. But it nurtures them despite not caring.

I am the recipient of millennia-old synchronic and diachronic efforts of multiple species (Rose 2012a,

⁵Article 71. Nature, or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes.

All persons, communities, peoples and nations can call upon public authorities to enforce the rights of nature. To enforce and interpret these rights, the principles set forth in the Constitution shall be observed, as appropriate.

The State shall give incentives to natural persons and legal entities and to communities to protect nature and to promote respect for all the elements comprising an ecosystem' (Republic of Ecuador, Constitution of 2008 art 71)

⁶Critiques of political mentions of Pachamama point to the perversion of Quechua and Aymara cosmologies by a supposedly anti-capitalist Bolivian government whose economic model is premised on the intensification of extractivism (Eviatar 2006, Burman 2017, Tola 2018). This in no way undermines the originality of the cosmological and praxiological ways in which Quechua and Aymara peoples interact with non-humans

van Dooren 2014). This multispecies work is what gives me my life and its conditions of possibility. My resulting obligation makes me responsible for the lives of all humans and non-humans in the community, which obligates me to act (i.e. to give and reciprocate) with respect for them. Receiving makes me responsible for ensuring that the cycle of giving, receiving, and reciprocating continues beyond my reach and beyond my own life — because this is the only way of ensuring that the gift of life can be passed on to others. My obligation is, essentially, to keep multispecies *munus* alive so that the community it creates is ecologically healthy enough to keep on going, so that life can keep being generated and gifted without an end in sight.

I can only refuse this obligation by breaking all ties that bind me to all other human and non-human participants in the gift cycle. When doing so, I am effectively ascribing to myself the status of being *immunis*, i.e. an exceptional dispensation of *munus* that allows me to receive without obligation, that allows me to receive without giving or reciprocating (Esposito 2011, p. 5–6 et passim). Thus, I refuse both *munus* and the communality that it enables by proclaiming that my own life is so exceptionally important that it must be disentangled from the gift cycle and from its inherent obligations.

For the past 5 centuries — the time span of capitalist modernity (Dussel 1995, Mignolo 1995, 2000, Quijano 2005, 2007, 2009, Moore 2015, Patel & Moore 2017) — political ecological problems resulting from industrial production and mass consumption have harmed this inter-generational gift of life. Humanity's

demographic expansion has been astounding during this time. Although in the last decades this occurred mostly in the Global South, this expansion has been brought about by the operation of Western capitalist modernity, which tentacularly spreads to other regions of the planet and disrupts previous local multispecies relations. To a large degree, human demographic expansion has been a side-effect of privileged humans' attempt to break away from the circulation of multispecies gift and to transform non-human activities into something that can be appropriated without reciprocity through supposedly politically and ethically neutral human endeavors. To solidify their privileged positions, Western corporate and political elites, as well as their neocolonial and scholarly proxies, have tried to disentangle humanity from multispecies communality, which eliminates any obligations that they might have towards other species (Aldeia 2022). Promoting a cosmology and a praxiology in which humanity is removed from multispecies bonds, the appropriation of and mastery over so-called natural resources became fair game for all humans, which enabled these elites to channel most of the energy generated by non-humans — but also by most humans — into the production of the activities and things that are needed to maintain their privilege. This has resulted in a dual logic of vital destruction. On the one hand, most humans have been condemned to live a much worse life than they could have had if they had remained firmly placed within multispecies communality. On the other hand, non-humans have been denied the material conditions of possibility necessary for the maintenance of healthy multispecies life. Hence, human expansion has been accompanied by the acceleration of extinction rates of multiple species (Barnosky et al. 2011, Ceballos et al. 2015, 2020, De Vos et al. 2015, IPBES 2019, IUCN 2022) and by a general elimination of the potentiality of most humans' lives, which are reduced to bareness.

Notwithstanding modern capitalist humans' attempted avoidance of reciprocity, human life still results from the time, efforts, and energy given to humans by non-humans. Acknowledged or not, nurtured or attacked, multispecies communality keeps on going. This obligates humans to give and to reciprocate this vital gift to future generations and to contemporary inhabitants of the planet, both human and non-human, which can only be achieved by assuming one's responsibility for ecological sustainability. I receive the worldly conditions of possibility for all that I can be, which obligates me to avoid leaving an indelible mark on the planet that harms the vital pos-

²The plural in multispecies communities matters. Nature is the entire assemblage of living beings, but only in an indirect way. Multispecies communities are always local, they are specific entanglements of species situated in time and space. Each community is connected to other communities and some are closer than others. No community is directly connected to all others and there is no single multispecies community that encompasses the whole planet (Rose 1996, p. 12–13, 2008, p. 56, 2011, p. 136–137, van Dooren 2014, p. 60, Haraway 2016, p. 31). Although there might be affinities between this conceptualization of multispecies communities and Gaia (Lovelock 2000, Latour 2015), this webbed, irregular, and localized interconnectedness separates them. Despite Latour's (2015) efforts to deny it, Gaia is a totality: it is 'the entire surface of the Earth including life' as 'a self-regulating entity' (Lovelock 2000, p. ix), it is 'the superorganism composed of all life tightly coupled with the air, the oceans, and the surface rocks' (Lovelock 2000, p. xii). Nature as multispecies communities is a patchwork of situated entanglements in which 'everything is connected to some things and not to others, but everything is connected and nothing is left stranded' (Rose 2008, p. 56)

sibilities of those who are yet unborn or of those who inhabit other regions of the Earth. As an answer to the life I have received, the only mark I can responsibly leave behind is, paradoxically, one that erases me by placing me within inter-generational succession: I remain insofar as my life does not hinder the conditions of possibility for future lives. Thus, the point of the obligation to reciprocate the life I have received goes fundamentally beyond the gift that I might (or might not) give to my direct descendant; it is what I give to potential descendants, i.e. the gift of the possibility of continued emergence of descendants.

4. THE ETHICS OF MULTISPECIES GIFT

The multispecies gift of life has a fundamentally ethical aspect. As I have argued before (Aldeia 2014, 2016, p. 141–142, 2017), the ethical impulse to become responsible for the other (Levinas 1966, 1991, 1998, 2007, Levinas & Nemo 1985) can only be empirically expressed as gift. Specifically, it can only appear as a gift of oneself to the other that aims at ensuring the other's life—and the possibility of this being a good life.

Although Levinas states that responsibility for the other, which is the ethical situation *par excellence*, is 'a responsibility that is justified by no prior commitment' (Levinas 1991, p. 102), this can be understood as the absence of a direct commitment to the other party in a dyadic interaction. The absence of such a commitment does not preclude the complex enmeshment in the gift cycle, which obligates the subject to reciprocate the life and vital potentiality that he received. As Levinas (2007, p. 33–34 *et passim*) reminds us, responsibility for the other occurs, necessarily, without reciprocity. But this simply means that I give of myself to the other without any expectation that he will reciprocate and that I do not give of myself to repay a debt. I give (of) myself to the other because I am responsible for him, but my responsibility comes from an obligation to reciprocate what I was given by ensuring his well-being. I am only in a position in which I must be responsible for the other because I have received life and all that comes with it. Receiving does not even cross my mind when I move towards the other. But I move towards him because I am obligated by the life that I have received, which resulted from the efforts of multiple individuals of multiple species. And although I am not repaying a debt—since this would fracture all ties between us, including my responsibility—by moving towards the other I am feeding a bond between us and, indirectly,

I am feeding bonds along the whole gift-giving community.

Similarly, Levinas states that 'responsibility for the other, going against intentionality and the will, which intentionality does not succeed in dissimulating, signifies not the disclosure of a given and its reception, but the exposure of me to the other, prior to any decision' (Levinas 1991, p. 141). But, insofar as it unfolds within the gift cycle, the gift of life is an obligation that defies systematic thought on the reason for giving—an act which is always also a reciprocation of the life that one has received. Exposure to the other cannot mean anything other than giving oneself to the other, which one does because one must.

For Levinas (1966, 1991, 1998, 2007, Levinas & Nemo 1985), when I see the other's face it shows me the other's overwhelming need, which commands me to become responsible for him. The sight of the face obligates me to be totally responsible for the other, including for his own responsibility, leading me to have to do for himself what he does not do.

Hence, when I become responsible for the other I also become responsible for his own responsibility. Since I am totally responsible for the other, my own responsibility is irreplaceable. Whereas I can replace the other in doing anything for him, no one can substitute me in carrying out what I must do. If someone else—a third—does for the other what I was compelled to do, then, my own responsibility remains unfulfilled since, although a needed act was carried out by someone, I never did what I was obligated to do (Levinas 1991, p. 13 *et seq.*, 139 *et seq.*).

This responsibility is always infinite, both in the sense that it never ends and because it is deferred to the other's future. Since my responsibility is total, it can only increase. As I do more for the other, I become more responsible for him, as Levinas (2007, p. 244) explains:

'The infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed; duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished. The better I accomplish my duty the fewer rights I have; the more I am just the more guilty I am'

Whatever I do, I do for the other. As such, my actions and its consequences for the well-being of the other are never coeval: they necessarily occur in the other's future, and not in my own.

The place of the non-human in Levinasian ethics is ambivalent (Crowe 2008, Davy 2007, Diehm 2012). In most of his work, he grants a privilege to humans that places the non-human entirely outside of ethics. However, the ambivalent notes on animals found in

The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights (Levinas 1997) or in the interview *The Paradox of Morality* (Levinas et al. 2003) justify expanding Levinasian ethics beyond the intra-human. When explicitly asked if animals are a part of ethics, Levinas (Levinas et al. 2003) does not deny this possibility. He just cautiously avoids any kind of definitive answer (Levinas 1997, Davy 2007, Crowe 2008, Diehm 2012), which I take as an honest refusal on his part to legislate on a matter that was outside the center of his research. Even if it might be necessary to push Levinasian ethics toward the non-human in ways that might not have sat entirely well with Levinas himself, his discussion of responsibility for the face is crucial to understand what multispecies gift demands of humans.

One of the aspects of Levinas' ethics that justifies considering that non-human individuals have a face is his metaphorical conception of the face. It is not the literal face of an other that compels me to be responsible for him, but the phenomenological appearance of an indication of his overwhelming need in front of me. Hence, the face can appear in a literal face, just as it can appear in a gesture, a shoulder, a hand, or a sound (Davy 2007). In *The Paradox of Morality* (Levinas et al. 2003), Levinas tentatively admits the possibility of animals having a face, but states that it is fundamentally different from the human face. Even so, he explicitly argues that animals give rise to ethical obligations, albeit these might not be so purely ethical as what happens between humans (Levinas et al. 2003). However, there appears to be no reason to deny non-humans, animals or others, the expressiveness of need and suffering that compels me to act towards their well-being (Davy 2007, Rose 2011, 2012b, Atterton 2012, Diehm 2012, Sözmen 2015). I can be faced by any other, human, animal, or plant. Fundamentally, as Davy (2007, p. 41 et passim) points out, I can be faced by a non-human other because the other appears before any thematization: the other is radically other and I cannot in any way reduce him to the same. The face compels me before I can ascribe any category to its bearer, even 'before recognizing the Other as human or otherwise' (Davy 2007, p. 41). It is 'only after ethics have come to pass (or failed to come to pass)' that the other can be 'recognized as human, plant, animal, rock, or known through some other thematic category' (Davy 2007, p. 41).

Another amplification of the Levinasian face is required for his ethics to be useful beyond the intra-human. For Levinas, to be faced is a phenomenological happening that requires my encounter with the other. If the multispecies gift of life is what obligates me, compelling me to reciprocate by ensuring that

life keeps on being given, then, the phenomenological underpinnings of Levinasian ethics need to be revised — although not entirely discarded. Contrary to Levinas, since responsibility for the face of the other unfolds empirically as a gift that works to ensure that there is a future in which the effects of my responsibility can truly be felt by the other, I am responsible for faces that I will never actually see. There is an opening in Levinas' thought to accept this idea when he argues that I am not coeval with the effects of my responsibility because these occur in the other's future, not in my own (Levinas 1966, p. 37–38, 1998, p. 228). If my responsibility unfolds in the other's future, why should it require the phenomenological happening of our encounter? It is not necessary that an actual face compels me to act ethically; rather, my obligation results from the potentiality of a face existing in its unavoidably suffered and needed state. Thus, I can be ethically bound to the face of an actual other who I have never seen, just as I can be ethically bound to the potential face of a potential other who I will never see, whose life might or might not come into being, but that obligates me to act responsibly now so that it retains the potentiality of being in a future that I will never experience.

If I am never going to see him, then the other who might yet be born, but with whom I will never be in direct interaction, does not have a face. However, the potentiality of a face is contained within the potentiality of his future existence. This obligates me to be responsible for this potential other: insofar as he is pure potentiality, this potential other whose face does not yet — and might never — exist cannot be responsible for himself. For Levinas 1991, 2007, the other's capabilities are irrelevant to my obligation towards him. But a potential other has no capabilities and cannot, by definition, be responsible for himself while I am still alive. Hence, only someone who is alive today can assume total responsibility for those who might yet be born, which entails ensuring that they will be able to experience a world in which multispecies relations are strong enough to keep life going. This is, in essence, the obligation to generate today tomorrow's political ecological conditions of possibility for this other who might yet be born to experience a good life.

By acting now with responsibility for both humans and non-humans, one is giving (a future) to future generations. This gift of a healthy planet is how life's potentiality becomes the definitive gift. What multispecies communities give to the newborn human, and what he is obligated to reciprocate to those that might yet be, is the potentiality of a future. For a good life to be possible tomorrow, life tout court must be safe-

guarded today. Thus, in this multispecies gift cycle, *munus* becomes the obligation to guarantee that the offering of unrestricted potentiality received by each human from multispecies synchronic and diachronic webs can keep being given in the future. This is the only way of also ensuring that, after millennia of 'eating shit', the damned of the Earth at least have the possibility of one day being better off than they are now.

Thus, at the full length of multispecies bonds, each human is embedded in the cycle of this gifted vital potentiality by reciprocating the potentiality that he has received to a future that he will never experience. This reciprocation can only be expressed as a form of ecologically sustainable action in which each one refuses that the potential face of those who might yet be will receive less than what he has received. If multispecies communities have given the newborn human the potentiality of life, he must guarantee that these communities are kept well enough so that they can keep giving an equal vital potentiality to those who might yet come.

Individual and collective conducts that do not assume responsibility for ecological sustainability fundamentally break away from this gift. Hence, they are inherently immoral insofar as those who act in such ways refuse to be responsible for the other. This makes ethics into an even more complex matter than it already is in direct dyadic phenomenological encounter. Acting without responsibility for ecological sustainability jeopardizes the potentiality of the life of an other that does not (yet) appear as a face. However, in what pertains to ecological sustainability and to the potentiality of life on Earth, the face of the other is not what obligates me—without escape—to become responsible for him; rather, the face is pushed forward to the future as potentiality of what might come to be. It is not the face that I see that compels me. It is a possible face that I will never know and for whom I have to act without experiencing the positive consequences of my actions. Levinas (1966, p. 37–38, 1998, p. 228) has already made clear that I am not contemporary of the infinite consequences of my finite action because these occur in the other's future. Multispecies ethics requires that this is taken to the extreme. My actions are not simply deferred and left to unfold without me; they are aimed at what might be—and I will never know if this was the case.

This is, in a way, framing ethics as hope. But hope requires prudence. Sending the face of the other to the future and denying the possibility of ever seeing it increases the ambivalence and contingency of human action. The political ecological consequences of present actions in a potential future are too unforeseeable

(Beck 1992) to allow responsibility to unfold according to a logic of mastery (Plumwood 1993, Serres 1998). There might be cases in which certain humans might have to temporarily act as humble stewards of particular multispecies communities to preserve them. But stewardship is not inherent to the human condition, nor is it unavoidable. Permanent and non-negotiable stewardship is just another name for mastery, and mastery played too great a role in the emergence and amplification of current political ecological problems to be contemplated. As such, when acting ethically for an other whom I will never meet, I become obligated to act prudently. If the other is not my contemporary, if he is not the contemporary of my children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, I must be extremely careful whenever I act to try to ensure that the gift of life's potentiality can keep on being given.

5. CONCLUSION: POLITICAL ECOLOGICAL IRRESPONSIBILITY AS THEFT

Ecologically unsustainable human action cannot be anything other than inherently immoral. Unfettered exploitation of (so-called) natural resources, industrial pollution, incitement to conspicuous or superfluous consumption, the promotion of a frenzied cycle of purchasing and discarding products, all of these are examples of immoral conduct. It is immoral because it refuses responsibility for the face of the other, human or otherwise, which breaks the diachronic and synchronic sequence of multispecies bonds, thus jeopardizing future vital potentiality.

Cartesian Utilitarianism promotes an irresponsible conduct that only works through theft. It can only unfold by appropriating the energy of non-humans, whose participation in gift-giving goes unrecognized by framing what they do in terms of available resources. Likewise, it requires appropriating the energy of billions of poor humans, most of them living in the Global South, whose efforts are channeled to keep the consumption and general lifestyles of the middle classes and elites. Much like non-humans, the world's poor are without a face: Cartesian Utilitarianism denies them the ability to compel modern capitalist middle classes and elites to be responsible—notwithstanding isolated and sometimes spectacularly simulated appeals to charitable care.

But Cartesian Utilitarianism is also inherently presentist: it reverses the healthy operation of multispecies gift by making the present depend on the future instead of the other way around. Modern cap-

italist lifestyles are founded on 'drawdown' (Catton 1982), i.e. on stealing 'resources' from the future, insofar as they depend on currently using more multispecies energy than can be renewed, thus damaging the conditions of possibility for energy circulation between individuals of multiple species in the future.

Theft is, in this sense, as bad as murder: it steals life's conditions of possibility and, in so doing, refuses ethics. As Levinas (1998, p. 149) put it, 'the otherness of the other is the extreme point of 'Thou shalt not commit murder' and, in me, a fear for all the violence and usurpation my existing, despite its intentional innocence, risks committing. From the *Da* of the *Dasein*, a risk of occupying the place of another, and thus, concretely, of exiling him, of consigning him to the miserable condition in some 'third' or 'fourth' world, of killing him. Thus, in this fear for the other man, an unlimited responsibility would be isolated, that responsibility one is never rid of, which does not cease in the last moment of the neighbor, even if responsibility then amounts only to responding, in the impotent confrontation with the death of the other, 'here I am' '.

Thus, the obligations associated with receiving life are also reversed. As pure vital potentiality, future beings cannot have responsibilities; they can only have eventual, but reasonably expectable, needs that compel present individuals to be responsible for them — more exactly, to be responsible for the possibility of their existence. However, in capitalist modernity, potential future generations of both humans and non-humans are made to give to the present before having received anything at all. They are, after all, merely potential. Present modern capitalist humans' obligations towards past and present multispecies communities are denied in a way that frames potential future beings as already owing something to the former — and that something is, precisely, the potentiality of their lives.

The fundamental problem is not individual action per se, which is deeply conditioned by what is contextually possible or not. Although ethics, *in extremis*, is an obligation to die for the other (Levinas 1998, p. 173), in the real world, everyone should have the right to a decent life. The problem lies in the foundational political ecological features of capitalist modernity, which circumscribe what a decent life ought to be to a behavior that breaks away from multispecies gift and responsibility. Hence, the ethical shortcoming lies squarely in capitalist modernity itself, which is a political ecological system that inherently depends on the refusal to act decently towards the other — to a large degree, by untenably circumscribing the kind of other

who deserves ethical consideration, hence, towards whom I might have obligations and to whom I am allowed to reciprocate. So, no non-humans fit in this narrowly defined other, as no merely potential being does. And what exactly constitutes this human other towards whom I might be obligated is, as women and non-Caucasian people well know, historically flexible. When Utilitarianism is added to this Cartesian framing of the other and obligation restricted to commercial debt, what one owes others, and what others one owes it to, becomes very little — so little, indeed, that it is not enough to guarantee that the potentiality of life can continue to be gifted by multispecies communities without an end in sight.

Recognizing ethical obligations towards non-humans and potential future humans — and also towards many of the human damned of the Earth — is impossible in capitalist modernity, which makes moving away from this political ecological system crucial to nurture life's potentiality. Modern capitalogenic limitation of ethics to some humans, along with the will to master and possess that this entails, is at the root of all major political ecological problems of our times, from climate change to the accelerated extinction of species. Although this establishes an ethical obligation to refuse capitalist modernity, such refusal involves not only ethics but also political action.

Many of the dominant answers to these political ecological problems are unsuitable and/or insufficient to create the conditions of possibility for ethics and a good life. Whether we are talking about electric vehicles, carbon credits, the payment of ecosystem services, taxes on plastic bags, vegetarian diets, certified-organic farming, or integrated pest management, what is at stake in the dominant ways in which these strategies are framed is simply greening capitalist modernity to leave it fundamentally unchanged. Some of these strategies (e.g. electric vehicles, organic farming) could be a part of an alternative political ecological system but have been co-opted by actors and entities whose interests lie in keeping capitalist modernity going, which severely curtails any revolutionary impetus behind them. Electric vehicles with batteries that require rare minerals extracted by Congolese child slaves or certified-organic fruits and vegetables grow in plantation-like farms owned by agribusiness corporations do not allow room for fundamental change, whether this is ethical or political ecological. Other strategies, such as carbon markets or the payment for ecosystem services, actually make the situation worse as they expand what can be appropriated by capitalist elites.

The recognition of life's potentiality as a multispecies gift that bestows ethical obligations on its recipients demands different political actions. It demands fighting against climate change and capitalogenic extinction through strategies to end the political ecological system that causes them and build alternative ways of multispecies life that can dynamically survive across generations. Although such strategies can only be horizontally decided by those who suffer the consequences of capitalist modernity, these entail localizing politics at the level of each multispecies community while keeping lines of communication open among them to allow each community to learn from others. Large-scale degrowth (Latouche 2009), significant de-industrialization, ending extractivist economies, the end of agribusiness, including dismantling both plantation farming (Haraway 2015, Tsing 2017, Haraway et al. 2019, Aldeia 2022) and industrial stockbreeding (Wallace 2016), fostering refugia for species to survive harsh climatic and ecological conditions (Haraway 2015, Tsing 2017, Aldeia 2023), curbing consumerism (including the end of marketing and planned obsolescence), downscaling daily mobility and ending individually owned cars, airplanes and boats, and stopping mass tourism are just some of the strategies required to build a political ecological system whose features are capable of undoing modern capitalogenic attacks on life and of nurturing the multispecies gift of life's potentiality. Such strategies are not ethical per se but are instead firmly situated in the realm of politics. They are, however, justified by the obligations that result from receiving life from multispecies communities and might contribute to keeping this gift alive.

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