

Éric Pommier. *La démocratie environnementale : Préserver notre part de nature*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2022.

How can democracy and environmental responsibility be reconciled? Éric Pommier tries to offer a philosophical answer to that important question. This is not a new issue, but his approach is original, for it articulates three types of thinking: ethical, political and ontological. As an expert of Hans Jonas' thought, Pommier finds inspiration in Jonas' ethics of responsibility and his phenomenology of life to shed light on the current environmental crisis. Pommier's approach is critical nonetheless, and seeks to address the shortcomings of an author infamous for weighing out the merits of democracy against those of "a well-intentioned, well-informed tyranny possessed of the right insights"⁴. However, it is regrettable that the work favors the issue of ethical and ontological foundations rather than that of the tangible institutions of environmental democracy.

Pommier endorses the Jonasian critique of a technical rationality that has become autonomous, but in the first two chapters, he underlines its shortcomings from the social point of view. The ecological crisis is not due to humankind as an undifferentiated entity, but disproportionately results from the activities of the most advantaged and powerful (31). Moreover, individuals cannot shake all responsibility off onto impersonal processes and institutions, since they participate in the reproduction of a social system which generates environmental injustices (40). However, Pommier is not fully convinced by Karl-Otto Apel's critique, which blames the imperative of responsibility for not being committed to justice but only to the "permanence of genuine human life"⁵ and thus for not ruling out sacrificing part of humanity as long as the species survives (61-2). Quite the contrary: Pommier means to demonstrate that because ethics is the aim of humankind, the idea of justice would be contained in the concept of "genuine human life" (81-2). Even though Jonas condemns Marxism as a dangerous utopia, his thought would therefore not be incompatible with social progress or human rights. Yet, assuming one could indeed analytically infer the idea of justice from the imperative of responsibility, the relevance of such a grounding to appreciate environmental justice is doubtful. As Pommier incidentally acknowledges it, that idea is but a peripheral theme in Jonas' work (83).

The third chapter is central and seeks to come up with the democratic theory missing from Jonasian ethics. Similarly to the case of justice, Pommier wants to infer the imperative of deliberation from the imperative of responsibility: insofar as coercion is not legitimate in itself, "there is a duty to deliberate in order to reach effective agreements enabling the preservation of future generations" (125). Besides, deliberation specifies the content of responsibility by taking real individuals, inequalities among them and their different preferences into account (130-5). Thus, due to their particular legitimacy, the victims of environmental harms have a right to deliberate, in a democracy which articulates the supranational, regional and local levels. Even if decisions must be informed by science, a government of experts is hence ruled out straight away. In terms of precise measures, Pommier advocates for the protection of whistleblowers, the recognition of ecocide, the creation of an international criminal court for the environment and for Stephen Gardiner's idea of a global constitutional convention focused on future generations. Nevertheless, the emphasis on deliberation leaves aside the issue of the fair distribution of environmental goods and burdens. Yet, this question is crucial as real democracy is imperfect, in particular in the way it accounts for the interests of future generations.

Finally, in the last chapter, Pommier completes his theory with an ontological foundation. Because he faults John Baird Callicott for remaining captive of the duality between subject and

⁴ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, trans. Hans Jonas & David Herr (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 147

⁵ Jonas, 11.

object instead of thinking the relationship between living beings (205), he once more turns to Jonas, who sees proof of the intrinsic value of living entities in their effort to persevere in their being. He also picks up the criticism of the ontology of science as developed by Arne Naess: "The melancholy of a tree is not a subjective illusion dissolving through the prism of a cold and analytical gaze anymore [...] It is a dimension of the being itself, namely a fact of relationship between the tree as perceived against this or that background by this or that subject." (224). Human beings' relationship to other living beings, with its emotional dimension, would unveil nature's intrinsic value. It is therefore by letting go of its grasp on it in order to respect its value that humankind would realize itself (246-7). However, the compatibility of such an ontology with the axiological neutrality promoted by liberal democracies, which Pommier by the way sees as problematic, can be interrogated. He claims that norms must emerge in the confrontation of perspectives (236-7), but one may wonder which deliberation rules are fit to find a common ground and arbitrage between divergent preferences and ontologies that cannot be discussed.

To summarize, the specific interest of this book lies in its conception of environmental democracy on ethical and ontological grounds. However, given the ecological crises which are threatening us, it seems that its phenomenological project is less urgent and more divisive than a reflection on the rules of procedural and distributive justice which must govern such environmental democracy.

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