

The Ontopoietic Approach of Human Positioning in the Web of Life

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Developed by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, phenomenology of life focuses on the thesis of “ontopoiesis” that unfolds an insightful vision upon the human positioning within the great plan of life. The complex and dynamic ontoipoietic view enlightens the creative human condition to be understood in terms of metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, anthropology, cosmology, aesthetics, as well as ethics and environmental philosophy. Among many original thematisations, we find an idea of utmost importance for the ethical conduct of man/woman, namely, to be “Custodian of everything-there-is-alive”. It designates a peculiar status of human being within the web of life in its wholeness, which challenges us to deeply reflect, to value and structure our attitudes, deeds, and behaviours activating their moral potential in our relationship with the natural environment. The purpose of this paper is to emphasize some coordinates of Tymienieckan phenomenology in the horizon of environmental ethics, disclosing the significance of the unique situation man/woman has to be aware of, to assume and continuously manifest as the responsible moral agent concerned with a constructive, fulfilling, ordering in flux experience of life, within the unity and differentiation of human-nature harmony.

Keywords: phenomenology of life, Tymieniecka, ontoipoiesis, Custodian of everything-there-is-alive, environmental ethics

A Brief Overview of the Ontopoietic Phenomenology

Acknowledged as one of the major trends in the contemporary philosophy, engaging and no less influencing a plurality of research domains (metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, anthropology, cosmology, ethics, etc.), *phenomenology of life* elaborated by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (1923-2014) offers us an exceptional path of better disclosing our inner potential (the true self), to cultivate it in a positive, constructive manner, toward a commendable (self)fulfillment, in the inward-outward balance with ourselves and with the environment we live in. Conceived as “the genuine starting point for all philosophy” (Tymieniecka, 1997, p. xiii), it prompts us, inter alia, toward the call for a *moral compass* so much needed in a general climate of disarray in which humanity “is apparently plunging into further chaos as disorientation about everything”; thus, turning to regain the power of wisdom in life, “to search after reason”, freeing us and leading on, as a “brewing flux of renewal, growth, and the perfecting of humanity”, able to “maneuvering upon the chaotic flux of life” (Tymieniecka, 2009, pp. xxiii, xxv).

Throughout an original work mainly unfolded in the four tomes of her fleuve-treatise *Logos and Life* (1988-2000), continued in the two books of *The Fullness of the Logos in the Key of Life* (2009; 2012), we face

an impressive demonstration of *philosophizing on life* and *human condition* on the base of *creativity* as “the Archimedean point of life’s multiple rationalities” (Tymieniecka, 1988a). Properly, a way of *creative philosophizing on life*, linked to the meaningfulness of the *ethos*—“an inspiring dynamic factor of experience” able to clear up about the “aim to grasp the complete human act” (Tymieniecka, 2000, pp. 547, 546)—and open to the human-nature holistic system of living that supposes an *ecological wisdom*—centered on the equilibrium between humans and the environment they rely on—does reveal itself in the “ontopoietic” design of life.

Tymieniecka’s concept of “Ontopoiesis of Life” represents the central nerve of an integrator and dynamic vision from the vital to the sacral levels of life, following a constructive route under a *telos* oriented schema focused on the “self-individualization of life” process. As the author states: *onto-* refers to “the ‘firstness’ of this process with respect to the scale of the existential formation”, meaning also “the indispensable and universal character of whatever there could be in the ‘objective’ form proper to human reality”; and *poiesis* refers to the continuous transformation, “advance” and “qualification”, namely the mark of creativity as the intrinsic factor of “becoming”; the all making the expansion of life in a complex and moving network that stretches between “cosmic relevancies and human creative invention” (Tymieniecka, 1995, p. 40).

The ontopoietic phenomenology facilitates and sustains an in-depth comprehension of the *creative experience of life* in its totality, which involves: the “creative context”, that is a “rupture with the established world” but not a complete discontinuity, seeing that “no creation emerges *ex nihilo*”; the activation of “creative inwardness” having at the center a “creative perception” as a “twilight zone”, a phase of consciousness “which is the transitional phase between vital and creative functioning and which is responsible for the bestowal of new meaning on the world”; and the “creative product” that forms a new synthesis, remaining conditioned by “mimetic limitations” such as “the initial spontaneity of human experience”, “the life-world of other humans”, and the “world as the prototype of its constitutive orientation”, permanently being projected “toward a transcendent *telos*” as a “longing for perfection”, for the fulfillment of human condition (Ryba, 2002, pp. 451-452). The core concept of the “Ontopoiesis of Life” is a defining one for the effort to encompass the entire existential dynamism with perpetual transformations from “the germinal preorganic and organic circuits” until “the sentient, sympathetic, psychic, social and cultural circuits of life”—as the author herself uses to reiterate.

Human Being as “Custodian of Everything-There-Is-Alive”

A particular status is assigned to human being in the territory of the ontopoietic phenomenology, that is, “Custodian of everything-there-is-alive”. It circumscribes, as a priority, an ethical situation of man/woman activating the moral commitment, respect, care, and responsibility towards the whole web of life, concomitantly towards each shared existential component in the balance of *bios* and *zōē*—biological and spiritual life, of natural, social, and cultural life, to be understood in the openness of human transcending and positioning in the cosmos.

An *ethos* is revealed as subsisting together with the *logos of life*—“the sense of sense” that “penetrates All” with its *impetus* and *equipoise* principles (see Tymieniecka, 2000; 2009)—in a kind of celebration of construction, elevation, order, equilibrium, harmony, and measure as coordinates without which the maintenance and progress of life wouldn’t be possible. Especially, searching a moral compass in the current turbulent times, an ethical demand so relevant for human connection with natural environment to which the status of “Custodian of everything-there-is-alive” does meet is to be found in the question of *measure*. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka unfolds an insight into the *golden measure* (2000, pp. 613-639) as key valuation stick for the “telic schema of life’s constructivism” in its

“cycle: *generation, fruition, accomplishment*” with its “innermost *sense of continuation, renewal*” (Tymieniecka, 2009, pp. 109, 110).

The retrieval of “the measure of all things” is one of the crucial requirements of our disorientated humanity enough self-alienated and threatened with ruin, seeing that there is a “radical insufficiency of the *measure* on earth”. What the phenomenologist of life terms “Custodian of everything-there-is-alive” activates a fundamental moral commitment and responsibility to the All, claiming the application of *measuring* principle, of the cardinal virtues of prudence and temperance, finally. A peculiar role is attributed to the *moral sense* (one of the three senses bestowing functions, beside the *aesthetic/poetic* and *intellective* senses); as the author points out, “we find in the Moral Sense the factor of moral valuation, sensibility, inclination, and judgment instilled into foundational human functioning” (Tymieniecka, 1986, p. ix).

Scrutinizing the *moral sense* that emerges through *imaginatio creatrix*, “from the capacity of man’s inventive function to reorganize the world on the basis of freedom”, Gary Backhaus (2001, p. 41) explains the Tymienieckan manner of introducing the *moral sense* as originating in the process of valuation, and considering the specificity of the moral movement—conflict, but also reconciliation between extremes—in connection with *measure*: “In moral valuation, measure is the principle of giving each their due. The achievement of measure occurs through the valuation of acts, feelings, emotions, actions, and attitudes in trans-actional situations.” (Backhaus, 2001, p. 41).

The need for *measure* and commitment signals to man the imperative to show himself as a self-consciously being, able of and deserving a life in freedom and dignity, by reducing ignorance and earnestly cultivating morality; at the same time, it indicates a human life loaded with responsibility for the totality of its various manifest forms. Hence man is the moral agent having to prove *wisdom* of beingness-in-becoming in the world; more specifically, to prove a “creative wisdom” that embodies the *measuring* in the “ontopoietic” unfolding of the “logos of life”. Man is distancing himself from the other living beings; but also he is intertwining with these, being the most important and responsible link in the chain of the “unity-of-everything-there-is-alive”. Somehow, *measure* reveals part of our singularity in the given world, serving to the understanding of the whole cosmic life in which we are just a particle, and no less to raise awareness of the human-cosmos interplay to be harmonized. Delineating Tymieniecka’s account of *measure* in the *logoic* strategies of life, El-Bizri (2003) notes,

The uniqueness of our position in the web of life destines us to encompass the whole of life from within, in the attempt to *construct* a great vision of the All that ties the knot of the multiple natural and creative rationalities of life whilst invigorating it with a commitment to uphold the measure. It is in this regard that the self-individualizing *entelechi*al principle of the *ontopoietic* unfolding of life serves as an axis that runs through the entire edifice of Nature-life. It is this self-individualizing axis, as an underlying *ontopoietic* structure within the *unity-of-everything-there-is-alive*, that is the source of the principle of measure that serves the common good of life. (El-Bizri, 2003, p. 132)

The phenomenological examination of *measure* as an axial principle for all the manifestations of life driven by the moral agent-custodian in the *ontopoietic* design of life, recognizing that “the human creative function is the prototype of moral action *tout court*” (Tymieniecka, 2004, p. xiv), leads us to assume the cultivation of a creative wisdom, a so needed productive temperance in the heart of nowadays existence by avoiding the fall in excesses and working to eventually fortify the human well-being within a safe and healthy environment; thus getting *a life worth living*. At stake is an ecological perspective focused on the creative virtualities of the human being in the frame of re-formulating “the concept of nature-life, one open to the cosmos and to culture” (Tymieniecka, 2009, p. 182).

The necessity of “a morality of negotiation” is claimed by the ontopoietic phenomenology, that strengthens what precisely does mean “human” by sharing and unfolding “transactions” with other manifestations of life; and this is taken into account with its “constructive moments”, emphasizing the great significance of a moral network of existential solidarity, justice and social contract, benevolence and empathy, responsibility and respect for the whole life, rooted in the factors of measure and motivation, of *moral commitment*, to be revived and nurtured for the common good of life.

An openness of phenomenology of life to environmental ethics is at stake, “tying the knot of multiple natural as well as creative rationalities and the invigoration of moral commitment” (Tymieniecka, 1995, p. 49). The ontopoietic phenomenology settles even the very own duty of man to continuously seek an improvement of his destiny in a “new heroic ideal” of life (see Tymieniecka, 1988b, pp. 72-111) in a moral creative register of sense: “Tymieniecka proceeds to elaborate an ethical position based on the notion of human creativity (rather than cognition or belief) as the organizing principle for human interaction with the lifeworld.” (Mardas, 2003, p. 48).

Beyond the “heroism of the mind”, claimed by Husserl to overcoming the European crisis in the first decades of 20th century by a courage of philosophy thanks to the eternity of the spirit ([1935] 1993, p. 230), Tymieniecka works in the direction of what we would name a *moral heroism*. In the balance between objectivity and subjectivity within the entire schema of life, engaging the rapport of man with others, with the societal and natural spheres, with himself, the important role of the *moral sense* is brought to light. Together with the *aesthetic/poetic* and *intellective* senses, it endows with significance the entire human functioning in the “gigantic life schema”. Carrying on a utilitarian tonality, the *moral sense* introduces into the individual line of behaviour “the Sentiment of Benevolence toward other living creatures, toward oneself, and toward life in general”. It is a valuable meaning-giving factor inserted in life, surging “as a virtue of the human condition”, being “operative particularly in the emergence and expansion of the specifically human sphere of existence” (Tymieniecka, 1990, pp. 13-15).

On the ground of human *creativity*, the *moral sense* prompts into a rational action to redress wrongs, to avoid perils, to transcend obstacles. It gets the experience of the evil, but especially the possibility of surpassing it, of working on the side of construction and sustainability, of bringing order from chaos, of recognizing harmony in its function to govern the living world. Emerging “from the capacity of man’s inventive function to reorganize the world on the basis of freedom”, the “moral sense brings to awareness the unity-of-everything-there-is-alive” (Backhaus, 2001, p. 41).

It is the *moral sense* that “makes the human being *Custodian of everything-there-is-alive*” (Tymieniecka, 1990, p. 16); and it proves to be a substantial concept for the contemporary environmental ethics. Setting up this formula, Tymieniecka underlines the distinctiveness of the creative human condition in the *ontopoietic* itinerary, and no less the human kinship with the entire web of life. The particular *custodian* status opens to a more nuanced comprehension of man’s *ecological identity* as a sense of human affinity with any participants in the process of ordering life, by a deep consciousness to experiencing the specific human “inward drama situated within the world of life, nature, and the cosmos” (Tymieniecka, 2012, p. 85).

We have to understand the “unity-of-everything-there-is-alive” as forming around the axis of “self-individualization in life”; autonomy but also interdependence of different organisms makes even the functioning of the cosmic order from which life emerges. The positioning as *custodian of everything-there-is-alive* engages man as moral agent in his in-depth ties with all the circumambient conditions of living, establishing human being at a pinnacle location, by assuming a fundamental responsibility towards the whole life. In the

effort of reshaping man's outlook on life by the moral consideration of the inherent worth of *everything*- and, concomitantly, of *All-there-is-alive*, an ethics of life is figuring both individually and holistically, for the present and the future alike. Man is able to rise to the level of *custodian* within the living world, putting in act his creative forces for developing and protecting his own well-being, his healthy and secure existence, merely connected to the ecological soundness of the other individuals and communities. It is the human vital concern to use his creative energies to striving for the ecosphere survival, safety, flourishing, for the improvement of life's quality. The phenomenologist of life writes:

The human being as inventor/creator emerges from within the system of vital forces and concurrently disrupts and distantiates himself from it, destroying his essential ties with it. This system of vital forces 1) carries the self-individualization of life, 2) accounts for the unity-of-everything-there-is-alive, and 3) points to a system of existential relevancies to the cosmic logos with its laws, sets down rules, and prompts synergetic resources toward a functional establishment for founding and carrying on the evolutive progress of life in all its variety. Among the forms of life, the human being appears to have attained the most advanced complexity as the free, that is, creative differentiator of the logos of life. (Tymieniecka, 2009, p. 183)

Man can be and he must be manifested as an authentic overseer, guardian and treasurer of the *common good*. He becomes "Custodian of life's equilibrium", by activating a set of *ethical values and principles*, like: care, toleration, devotion, generosity, ecojustice, responsibility, solidarity, moderation, wisdom, respect, benevolence, sharing-in-sympathy, and ultimately *love of life*.

According to Verducci (2012), phenomenology of life is developed in an "organic" mode, by "liberating phenomenology from the modern-rationalistic and pseudo-scientific rigidity, from westernizing, without quitting the analytic capacity and no less the synthetic, inferential and conjectural capacities of the human mind" (p. 26).

The edifying exegesis of the phenomenology of the *logos of life* and *human condition* "within the unity-of-everything-there-is-alive" emphasizes the novelty of an "*eco-phenomenology*" in the frame of a "cosmological vision upon the methaphysics of life" (Verducci, 2012, pp. 93, 95), on the ground of a complex, dynamic, and original *ontopoietic* approach of life that changes the entire phenomenological perspective; it also challenges new ways of philosophical reflection, comprehension, explanation, and interpretation of life entailing environmental issues.

Conclusion

The *ontopoietic* depiction of life gives us an open-ended view on the web of human-nature life, simultaneously unfolded as timing and spacing, flux and stability, singular and multiple, differentiation and sameness, in its fleetingness and essence, with disruptions and continuity, by inward-outward directions, on hidden and obvious arteries, that finally reveals—beyond any contradictions—the significance of the universal harmony of the All.

In the constructivism of life, human being holds the status of *custodian of everything-there-is-alive*, as Tymieniecka draws attention. This phrase is a call to thoughtfully comprehend, cultivate, demonstrate, and increase our specific human valences—particularly, in the moral tonality—of being microcosm in the macrocosm, as part of (and not apart from) the wholeness of life. A nuanced philosophy as an *organon* for an *ecological lifestyle* comes to the fore; it makes us reconsider even our vital own interests within the natural environmental sustainability, the human long term concerns, and the importance of a symbiotic relationship

with all life forms, keeping the conscience awake as regards the cosmic architectonics of life. We face an inspiring phenomenological approach—in fact, “an enlarged inquiry” establishing “a *sui generis* phenomenology of phenomenology” (Verducci, 2015, p. 9)—that supports the nowadays efforts for the “green new deal”; since a vision of man positioning as the *custodian* in the *ontopoiesis of life* has been offered to be fruitfully explored, undertaken, and performed by each of us.

Obviously, as *custodian of everything-there-is-alive*, man is the one single responsible among the Earth’s living systems for building a healthy and thriving world; he is the one able to operate for the accomplishment of *Geo sapiens*—perhaps the “*Homo sapiens*’ biggest challenge”, acting for “a renaturing of everyday life” (see Louv, 2011). The ontopoietic phenomenology intertwines, to a certain degree, with the environmental humanities in full affirmation during the last years, and it discloses an *ethos of life* on the pathway of getting in touch with the environment, grounded in a “wisdom made possible owing to the creative virtualities of man” who “participates fully in all the circuits of the great game of life and has urgent reasons, more pressing at the present moment of history than ever, to strive to unravel and grasp its innermost sense” (Tymieniecka, 2000, pp. 313-314).

The pivotal idea about *man: custodian of everything-there-is-alive* proposes a key to understanding the crucial position of human being in the universal life-system, articulating both *auto-* and *hetero-poiesis* processes which embrace all-that-is/becomes; and it meets the axioms of the environmental humanities (see Marshall, 2002), showing a moral guidance in the endeavour to find reliable solutions to the major problems of the ecological crisis of our world.

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