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Leonardo da Vinci Our Contemporary?

The “Ecohumanist” Code of Renaissance Sages

Abstract

In Dan Brown’s much chastised version of Gnostic cosmology in *The Da Vinci Code*, there are ample references to a rebellious, Gnostic-feminist aspect of Leonardo’s work. This essay inspects Leonardo da Vinci’s supposed gnostic credentials and argues that, rather than searching for traces of a feminine Christianity in his art, it is more fruitful to revisit his unique “ecohumanist” wisdom. It is not the pursuit of the feminine holy grail that is the subversive aspect of the Leonardian legacy; it is his view of humans, nature and the human role in nature. This view is “heretic” both vis-à-vis the mainstream cosmology of the Renaissance, and in relation to the later Cartesian legacy which has haunted modernity up to the present time.

In Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*, a scandalous metaphysical thriller for the 21st century, the brilliant cryptographer Sophie gazes at *The Last Supper* painting by Leonardo da Vinci and inspects the face of St. John, Jesus’s beloved apostle. But St. John is not a man, she is told. Rather, St. John’s hermaphrodite features suggest Mary Magdalene who ostensibly represents the sacred feminine that was suppressed by the Catholic Church (Brown 2003).

The Da Vinci Code has been a masterpiece of collective insult: it has outraged the Vatican, the Opus Dei, medievalists, religious scholars, historians and literary purists. Some thirty books have been published debunking Brown’s historical antics and working to separate fact from

fiction: The gnostics were *not* feminists; Mary Magdalene's vagina was *not* the site of the Holy Grail; The Priory of Sion, an alleged ancient religious conspiracy, was *not* founded in the Middle Ages but in the 1950s in France by a political radical. Etc, etc. And yet, in spite of being intellectually discredited, the novel has acquired a status of a "heroic" hoax. The reason is simple: *The Da Vinci Code* has made an assault on the Constantinian Catholic Church that "had subjugated women, banished the goddess, burned nonbelievers, and forbidden pagan reverence for the feminine" (Brown, 239). Not only did Brown re-inscribe Christianity into the New Age's paradigm of the search for defiant spirituality; he has massaged a compound idealist in each reader – a radical socialist, feminist, and a seeker on the path, repelled by institutional Christianity.

Brown's intellectual *succès de scandale* casts an interesting light on the postmodern longing for a new Paradise Lost. What is "new" is the dream of a multicultural *cosmopolis* of equal genders, races and denominations: a stark contrast to the atavistic nineteenth century fantasy of a superior, pure and pristine *Volk*. What is "lost" is a liberal Christianity and a feminine, open-minded religion. The *sujet* of an alternative, "radical" past points to a progressive beginning which had promised a carnivalesque emancipation, only to then be subverted by masculine dogma and fundamentalist paranoia. In this scheme of things, human progress has been a long, paradoxical detour from Christian-feminist socialism to - Christian-feminist socialism.

This post-Enlightenment, feminized mythology features not just in popular fiction; it underpins much of the postmodern anthropological imaginary, where indigenous cultures still function as sites of contact with the sacred, even if they talk to us via cellular phones and laptop computers (Sandall 2003; Freke and Gandy 2005; 2007). And it underpins a strain of historical revisionism which, like Stephen Toulmin's study of the Renaissance, has attempted to prove the existence of an alternative, tolerant modernity born at the time of Leonardo da

Vinci, and subsequently blocked by the Enlightenment's quest for certainties (Toulmin, 1990).

According to Toulmin, the core features of the Renaissance agenda, such as tolerant skepticism, pluralism, local experience, rhetorics, and holism, were later replaced by rationalist and monistic systems, the elevation of logic and the apartheid of mind and body.

In this essay I interrogate Toulmin's idea of an alternative, "suppressed" modernity by re-examining Leonardo da Vinci's view of nature, humanity and progress. As I shall try to show, there is indeed a da Vinci "code", but it is both more conservative and more radical than Dan Brown imagined. The essence of this code is uniquely "eco-humanist" wisdom, which invites us to rethink our solutions to the current environmental and existential crises.

The "Mind" of Leonardo

Despite the scholarly controversy over the exact boundaries of the "Renaissance breakthrough" (spanning, roughly, from 1350 to 1620), there are at least two accounts of the Renaissance which have survived to the modern consciousness. The first one identifies it as a period of *risorgimento*: intense dialogue and interpenetration of cultures, engagement with classical thought, an explosion of scientific and artistic innovation, and, most importantly, a growing awareness of the uniqueness of the human self and human dignity. Pico della Mirandola's oration *De hominis dignitate* (1486) is often cited as an emblem of the time, a tribute to the limitless possibilities of the self: "You may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine" (Cassirer, Kristeller, H.H. Randall, Jr. 1948, 224-225).¹

¹ According to an influential interpretation offered by Ernst Cassirer, Pico launched a semi-Nietzschean vision of man as "superior to angels and equal to God". But we can also read this passage as alluding to the idea

The second version of the Renaissance is darker and more confounding (Bruckner 1867; 1990; Burke 1998; Parks 2005). In this account, the peak of the Medici's most splendid period, the end of the 15th century, was the "age of extremes," teeming with savage wars, conspiracies, assassinations, atrocities of the Inquisition, and widespread corruption. More paradoxes abound. Banks were born even though usury was a heinous crime, considered to be *contro natura*. Italy blossomed while ferocious fratricidal wars were waged between Florence, Pisa and Milan, the Medicis, the Borgias, the Sforzas, and the popes. Similarly, the religious arena was in a state of vertigo: people went on believing, though most popes had been accused of avarice, incest, piracy, simony, sodomy, tyranny and fornication. The paragon of wickedness, pope Giovanni XXXIII, had a tomb raised in his honour, which immediately became an object of popular devotion and a place of miracles (Parks 54).

I argue for a third version of the Renaissance. It was created by a tiny *respublica litterarum*, which included European humanists such as Leonardo, Rabelais, Cervantes, Machiavelli, Ficino, Galileo, Montaigne and Shakespeare. They were Europe's first dissident intellectuals, the adepts of secret knowledge who challenged the theocratic doxa of the time.² But they were hardly a band of Don Quixotes. Aware that their humanist heresies were, according to the prevalent law, a civil offense punishable by death³, they lived with a choice between bowing their heads or having them cut off. Most chose the bowed heads – and spoke in codes.

of a Protean human nature navigating between the divine and the beastly. Implicit in it is a scenario of human history as a series of improvements and setbacks. Leszek Kolakowski has argued that "The humanism outlined in Pico Della Mirandola's famous discourse on human dignity, a humanism defined by the idea of man's incompleteness, his inevitable state of hesitation, and the insecurity caused by his freedom of decision, is perfectly compatible with Christian teaching." See Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago University Press, 1990), 28.

² It is enough to recall that the sixteenth and seventeenth century censors imposed ban on all the writings by Machiavelli, Boccaccio, Erasmus (a ban subsequently modified after suitable expurgation), major works of Lorenzo Valla, Bruno and Campanella, Galileo's *Two Chief World Systems*, and Charrons *De la sagesse*.

³ This in accordance with Emperor Frederick II's Constitutions of Melfi (1231) and Innocent IV's bull, *Cum adversus haereticam pravitatem* (1245).

Although the Renaissance, with its cult of genius as a divine particle of God, was the first officially sanctioned “vanity fair” of a band of humanity, its greatest giants – Leonardo da Vinci and William Shakespeare – remain enigmas. The scattered and rudimentary facts of their biographies have inspired countless academic speculations, and they each produced daunting, multifaceted work which both codified the Renaissance revolution and prefigured humanity’s future. Leonardo’s first biographer, Giorgio Vasari, wrote:

...sometimes, in supernatural fashion, beauty, grace, and talent are united beyond measure in one single person, in a manner that to whatever such a one turns his attention, his every action is so divine, that, surpassing all other men, it makes itself clearly known as a thing bestowed by God (as it is), and not acquired by human art. This was seen by all mankind in Leonardo da Vinci, in whom, besides a beauty of body never sufficiently extolled, there was an infinite grace in all his actions; and so great was his genius, and such its growth, that to whatever difficulties he turned his mind, he solved them with ease. (Vasari 1550; 1917, Bramly 1991: 411).

Leonardo was admired and feared by his contemporaries as a magus, painter, sculptor, architect, inventor, anatomist, botanist, zoologist, musician, physicist, weapon designer, costume maker, hydraulic engineer, and the-man who, some forty years before Galileo, had ostensibly remarked: “The sun does not move” (Nuland 2000, 106). But also the man who specialized in spectacular failures: unfinished paintings, half completed sculptures and bridges, and botched projects of river diversion.

Leonardo’s gargantuan intellectual appetites and his sexual abstemiousness have spawned many theories. Was he a homosexual? An anxiety driven wretch suffering from ADHD and visual dyslexia (which produced a tendency to read letters in reverse order and, consequently, mirror writing and mirror reading)? A staunch empiricist whose inventions were a

compensation for his scandalous inability to read the classics in original? (Røsstad 1995). In some historical reconstructions we see a man who should immediately be adopted by modern environmental NGOs as their patron. A man whose surrogate God was nature and who insisted: “Though human ingenuity may make various inventions, ... it will never devise any invention more beautiful, nor more simple, nor more to the purpose than nature does; because in her inventions nothing is wanting and nothing is superfluous” (Richter 1970 no. 837; Røsstad 1995: 51). A famous eccentric, wearing colourful clothes, taking passeggiatas in the streets of Florence and buying caged birds to set them free. A precursory vegetarian who chose not to eat meat for moral reasons (Muntz, 1898; MacCurdy 1928; Vezzosi 1997).

However, as soon as we establish these palatable facts, contradictions start piling up.

Although extolling the perfection of Nature, Leonardo often emphasized the cruelty and instability of the elements: “O! Indifferent Nature! Wherefore art thou so partial, being to some of thy children a tender and benign mother, and to others a most cruel and pitiless stepmother?” (Richter no. 1293). There are indications that he was an agnostic. But then, why did he convert to Catholicism on his death bed? In *The Mind of Leonardo da Vinci* (1928), we read that “The mere idea of permitting the existence of unnecessary suffering, still more that of taking life, was abhorrent to Leonardo”(MacCurdy 1928, 67). But let us not jump to conclusions. True, he hated war, which he called *pazzia bestialissima* – most bestial madness – but he was no pacifist. He designed numerous prototypes of weapons and fortifications. “When besieged by ambitious tyrants”, he reasoned, “I find a means of offense and defense in order to preserve the chief gift of nature, which is liberty; and first I would speak of the position of the walls, and then of how the various peoples can maintain their good and just

lords” (Richter no. 2037). Maybe the planned weapons were his calling cards for potential patrons, and he had no real intention of ever making them?⁴ Or maybe not?

What about Leonardo the heretic who painted the Last Supper? Did he imagine John, the Christ’s Beloved Disciple, as a woman, possibly Mary Magdalene? He painted Peter with one hand holding a knife, and the other put on Mary’s throat. Was it a gentle assault on the Church of Rome that had deliberately silenced the heretical, Gnostic tradition, symbolized by Mary (Freke and Gandy, 2005)? And did Leonardo paint The Adoration of the Magi to show the divine nature of adoration or, rather, to discretely suggest its mindlessness?

Leonardo-the-Gnostic?

Answering these questions requires evidence and the documentation is scanty. The hypothesis that Leonardo was a covert Gnostic is attractive and consistent with Dan Brown’s creative and leisurely approach to the idea of humanity’s derailed progress. The “Gnostics” – a collective designation of a large number of greatly varying pantheistic sects – flourished for some time before Christ, revived in the 3rd century, and continued as a subterranean stream of Christianity into our times. They have shared the idea of ‘gnosis’ or ‘mystical knowledge’ preached by the original Christians, who held that it was possible to experience a state of all-consuming oneness and all-embracing compassion. Some of the sects, such as the followers of Valentinus, idolized a “Mother” - or a “*sophia*” - as the divine feminine, others were explicitly misogynous, elitist and puritan (Pagels 1989). Most strikingly, the Gnostics have stripped Christianity of magic, miracle and marvel: they demoted the vengeful, capricious and

4 Leonardo claimed that he knew “How by an appliance many are able to remain for some time under water. How and why I do not describe my method of remaining under water for as long a time as I can remain without food; and this I do not publish or divulge on account of the evil nature of men who would practice assassinations at the bottom of the seas, by breaking the ships in their lowest parts and sinking them together with the crews who are in them” (Leicester 22, V).

masculine God of the Old Testament to a malicious impostor and read the Bible as a fictional work.

Though there exists no authoritative study on the subject, there are aspects of Leonardo's life and work which do suggest his affinity with the followers of Gnosis. In his profuse descriptions of nature there is hardly any mention of God, and certainly no trace of the biblical Creation story. Many of Leonardo's representations of saints boldly flaunt the absence of obligatory halos over their heads. His insistence on personal experience and his striving to overcome the duality of things may have had Gnostic origins. Ditto his legendary contempt for the libido: "Intellectual passion drives out sensuality.... Who curbs not lustful desires puts himself on a level with the beasts. One can have no greater and no lesser mastery than that which one has over one's self" (Nuland, 30).⁵ In short, it may well be that Leonardo's programmatic rejection of the desires of the flesh – and his conscious fashioning of himself as a Renaissance dis-embodied "super-ego" – had Gnostic sources.

Like the Gnostics, Leonardo was deeply pessimistic about humanity's potential: "Some there are who are nothing else than a passage for food and augmentors of excrement and fillers of privies (latrines)," he raged, "because through them no other things in the world, nor any good effects are produced, since nothing but full privies results from them" (Richter no. 1179).

Such pessimism naturally led to an obsession with a punitive Apocalypse: "Nothing will remain on earth, or under the earth, or in the waters which will not be persecuted disturbed and spoiled, and those of one country removed into another....O Earth, why dost thou not open and engulf them in the fissures of thy vast abyss and caverns, and no longer display in the sight of heaven so cruel and horrible a monster?" (Richter, 1293).

⁵ Freud's contention was that Leonardo was one of those rare individuals whose "libido withdraws from the fate of the repression by being sublimated from the outset into curiosity, and by reinforcing the powerful investigation impulse [which would otherwise be directed toward sexual curiosity]" (Nuland, 17-18).

This writing is more than dissident; it gives no consolation to papmongers or propagandists of the joyful, triumphant Renaissance. Leonardo had what we can only call an unfoolable mind, one that *could* have been honed by the Gnostic view of life on earth as an interplay of darkness, ignorance and desire.

Finally, there is some evidence of Leonardo's connection with "The New Platonic Academy", a heretical society dedicated to the study of Plato and of the mystical and Gnostic traditions banned by the Orthodox Church. The group, led by Marcilio Ficino, celebrated Plato's birthday every 7 November at the Medici's villa at Careggi. Lorenzo de' Medici (il Magnifico) – a charismatic and libidinous leader – was convinced that the "good citizen, the good Christian, must be a Platonist because only the Platonist appreciates and participates in this striving for the beautiful and better" (Parks 187). But Leonardo's formal link with the Academy is yet another subject of speculation. Knowing that he would never be a member of a club that would have him, we can only surmise that he participated in the group meetings out of curiosity rather than to demonstrate his allegiance to the Gnostic or Platonic creed.

Cosmos and Polis

I propose we suspend our quest for the proofs of Leonardo's gnostic and feminist heresy that would make him our "radical" contemporary. I suggest that the most fascinating – and timely – aspects of Leonardo's worldview were not so much his gnostic liaisons, as his humanist approach to the study of nature and culture and his view of human civilization. Even a peremptory look at the way Leonardo spoke about nature – the tropes and metaphors he invoked and the tone he adopted – is enough to see two important facets of his cosmology: firstly, the anthropological humility of man, and secondly, an organic, holistic view of man and nature. "Even if man was as large as our earth, he would look no bigger than a little star

which appears but as a speck of the universe,” he insisted. For him: “This earth has a spirit of growth, and its flesh is the soil; its bones are the successive strata of the rocks which form the mountains; its cartilage is the tifa stone; its blood the spring and the rivers” (Richter, 880; 929).

This constant navigation between the world of nature and the world of humans – and the corresponding complementary studies of the body of the earth and the human body – reaffirmed the microcosm-macrocosm analogy which was prevalent among the Renaissance thinkers from Shakespeare to Erasmus and Montaigne (Danby 1968). Nature, as perceived by Leonardo and other prominent Renaissance thinkers, was not a dead or static mechanism – the dominant view of 17 century rationalism. It was a living organism which – like human nature – could not be dominated or exploited with impunity. True, there was a utilitarian hierarchy of beings, in which plants existed for man and the animals, and man was the divine reflection. But the Renaissance thinkers were strongly aware of the noumenous aspect of nature, manifest in its creative and destructive force. Much as he was spellbound by water as a source of all life, Leonardo was also obsessed by its unpredictable violence, and indulged in a fantasy of a great tsunami that would finally swallow the earth. His sixteen *Deluge* drawings feature neither angels nor devils, they make no allusion to a Noah’s ark or to redeemed souls. They offer no hope. Everything goes to rack and ruin, everything is lost.

It is certainly hazardous to generalize from a plethora of movements and traditions, but we have reasons to argue that the most innovative core of a cosmology embraced by leading Renaissance sages, displayed three distinctive characteristics: Firstly, the abandonment of the medieval conception of the *natura naturata* (the created nature), and the promotion of *natura naturans* – a complex, creative process, which participates in the divine essence. Secondly, abolition of the medieval, unified view of nature and a bold exploration of the infinity and plurality of worlds springing from the womb of becoming. Nature was an exuberant, mutable

pattern: sometimes representing reason that holds the community together (cf. Erasmus), at other times a benevolent arrangement (cf. Hooker and Bacon), once a lion-headed goddess “red in tooth and claw” (Hobbes), once a combination of all these (Shakespeare). But most importantly, the majority of Renaissance thinkers, including Leonardo, believed in the idea of the limits of nature – and of human nature.

As has been observed, the perception of Renaissance humanism as a view of life which replaces God and puts man in the centre, has been largely a creation of the 19th century (Mousley 2007). A close reading of the writings of the Renaissance “dissidents” reveals a constant tension between the impulse to transgress and the need for ethical boundaries.

Leonardo, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Erasmus all called for the need of humility and modesty vis a vis nature’s powers. More, they showed that ethical limits are not merely external impositions foisted on reluctant individuals naturally prone to excess, but “come from within” (Mousley 98). Shakespeare especially showed how all excesses and indignities lead to a triple crisis: the end of human cooperation at the social level, fear and anxiety at the individual, psychological plane, and revolt of nature at the cosmic level.

To be mastered, both nature and human nature had to be studied and understood. Leonardo reasoned: “The river which is to be turned from one place to another must be coaxed and not treated roughly or with violence” (Richter 1970: 351-2). Even Francis Bacon – often chastised by modern environmentalists as an apologist of the “rape of nature” – insisted that “we cannot command nature otherwise than by obeying her” (Danby, 87). True, the civilizational ideal coruscating in this vision was based on the belief in the necessity to control both human and natural elements. People were to stop being passive victims of nature’s fads and learn how to contain its devastating power. But the basis of their control of nature was to be a codex of restraint which would put a limit on the violation of the essential “nature” of things.

Toulmin has suggested that the most inspiring facet of the Renaissance *Weltanschauung* – shared by Leonardo, Machiavelli, Montaigne and Erasmus – was founded on the perception that Cosmos (the order of the universe) and Polis (the order of society) were interdependent. Leonardo and Machiavelli were never separately studying nature or culture, history of man and history of the elements, but always in conjunction – as a “Cosmopolis” (Toulmin 1990). Although Toulmin does not mention this example, one of the most striking illustrations of this Renaissance Cosmopolis in action is to be found in the collaboration between Leonardo and Machiavelli on diverting the Arno river. The project, commissioned in 1502, had two objectives: firstly, to enable the Florentines to reconquer the rebellious city of Pisa by means of depriving it of the access to sea-trade. Secondly, it was to ensure not just a seaport for Florence, but wealth and prosperity for all of Tuscany. Leonardo and Machiavelli seemed eminently qualified to take up the challenge. Leonardo was obsessed by the idea of civilizing rivers; Machiavelli was determined to civilize politics. Leonardo drew countless hydraulic contraptions that were to turn unsanitary Italian metropolitan areas into precursory “bio-cities” with an advanced system of canalization. Machiavelli was a seasoned diplomat longing for a united Italy, where the competing families would be less preoccupied with plots to outshine, outwit, and crush one another, and engage more in creating viable defenses against the forays of the Spaniards and the French.

The project failed, but it had interesting, largely underestimated, political implications. In his compelling study *Machiavelli, Leonardo and the Science of Power*, Roger D. Masters suggests, rather boldly, that in the process of working together Leonardo influenced Machiavelli’s political vision and political anthropology which came to define modern society (Masters 2009). Not only did Machiavelli begin to describe a social order that was rational and scientific; the work on the Arno provided him with the central metaphors in *The Prince*. The book is full of elliptic references to the “dikes and dams” that control “the river of

fortune" and civilize social and political processes. In one famous passage Machiavelli observed: "I likened her (that is Fortune) to one of these violent rivers which, when they become enraged, flood the plains, ruin the trees and the buildings, lift earth from this part, drop in another; each person flees before them, everyone yields to their impetus without being able to hinder them in any regard" (Machiavelli: 98).

All this points to a pragmatic "elemental diplomacy" that filtered from Leonardo's studies to Machiavelli's vision, an idea of realist politics based both on rational calculation and on the perception of limits of nature – and of human nature. The cosmos and the polis were intertwined, and transgressions in the former always led to a pandemonium in the latter.

The Ecohumanist Wisdom

The humanists did not advocate any coherent humanist or environmental ethics. If there is a moral philosophy running through their work, it could be called a "praise of inconsistency." We see it manifest in Leonardo, the secret gnostic and agnostic, occasionally an atheist and, at the end his life, a good Catholic. The question whether his turn from religious promiscuity to the Catholic faith was carefully staged, or whether it stood for his final understanding of the attractiveness of the Christian vision as based on the fragility and incompleteness of man, is difficult to answer. His life was a flamboyant experiment in which faith was treated not as a fixed destination but as a spiritual quest which sprang from his often contradictory aspirations and longings.

There is a flight from a contracted point of view in Leonardo's work, an attempt to translate the accumulated wisdom of the ages into a new cosmology which would be more hospitable to human longings and dilemmas. His universe – which stops being exclusively a monument to God and becomes a home for the human self – appears as both exhilarating and threatening. Leonardo's *Notebooks* – along with many other Renaissance texts - evoke a constant tension between the world of benign and malign nature, the world of one God, and that of many gods – and the predicament of homeless humans at the mercy of the elements. The plurality of worlds is the mark of the time. Shakespeare's *King Lear* – humiliated by his daughters – turns first to the gods and, upon receiving no answer from them, to the natural order. In the end, while searching for the true source of justice, he finds that it has a natural basis in the human being's social nature.

This does not mean that the Renaissance inconsistency was a celebration of a “postmodern”, pulverized, flippant self. Rather, it was a sign of a pragmatic retreat from medieval fundamentalism. We find it in the Erasmian critique of the scholastics for their cerebral overinterpretation of the Bible, and his call for a bible which would be accessible and speak to people's needs for meaning, purpose and sustenance. We find it in a Hamletic personality, torn between the ancient code of blood revenge and a healthy scepticism about the irrational demands of the family ghosts. We detect it in Machiavelli's ideal of a prince who must be a lion, a fox and a dove in one person. Last but not least, we discover it in the paradoxes of Leonardo's life and writings. His exaltation of knowledge and understanding, and his unapologetic contempt for humans who are merely “consumers” – slaves of wants, foibles and follies – are a daunting expression of the pursuit of excellence and *arete*. “One can have no smaller or greater mastery than mastery of oneself,” he insisted. Needless to say that the call to curb one's instincts and passions sounded rather preposterous when issued by a tempestuous genius. Similarly Leonardo's appeals for cosmic humility were incompatible

with his uncompromising elitism. But, in his view, humanity and nature were to be redeemed by the “civilizers” like him: those few individuals who observed the code of restraint and aspired to virtue.

To sum up: I wish to suggest that there is an adaptive wisdom underlying these contradictions, a wisdom founded on empirical observation, reverence for nature, and respect for human dignity - but also on a general distrust of the human species. The concept of “eco-humanism” which I propose to describe Leonardo’s worldview is used here in a metaphorical sense, as it points ideas which were prior to the proper discovery of the environment and the establishment of science of ecology. Ecohumanism refers to a cosmology based on humanist ideals, but one in which the experience of the self is intimately connected to the fear and reverence for the natural world. The basic premise of humanism, the recognition of the inherent dignity of all members of the human race, is modified in this case by values springing from observation of the natural world. Ecohumanism is anthropocentric, but it is an anthropocentrism tempered by the imperative to understand nature's ways and the awareness of nature’s limits. The "eco-" prefix, we may say, protects humanism from its own excesses.

The Renaissance ecohumanists – Leonardo, Machiavelli, Shakespeare – advocated a moral codex based on the necessity of civilizing both humans and rivers – but also the recognition that this civilizing project the violation of their unique nature but on proper study and cultivation. But Machiavelli also warned against being over-civilized. Any nation must be able to wage war to protect its own liberty,” he argued. “There is a moral pathology of goodness as well as evil, and one can be as perilous as the other” (Machiavelli, 1532; 1986, 22).

Were we to point to one protagonist incarnating the ecohumanist wisdom it would be the Shakespearian wise Fool. He is often the sage and the skeptic in one person, and they are

constantly converse with each other. The wise Jester - however perspicuous or pungent in his impertinences and unmaskings - remains ultimately faithful to a set of values and norms which testify to the humanity within him rather than to abstract Reason. Equally critical of wickedness and saintliness, the Shakespearian Fool prefers to walk in a darkness he cannot fathom rather than to stay in the light of a Reason which he cannot abide.

After Leonardo

The post-Renaissance project has been epitomised in the practice of Descartes when he “shut his eyes and stopped up his ears” to concentrate on deducing what could be known with certainty from the slimmest imaginable base, the infamous “cogito.” The closing of eyes and ears cut him off not only from the messiness of reality, but also from an engagement with historical tradition. Since Descartes, modernism has been pursued with an optimistic and ruthless focus on the future and a simultaneous dismissal of cultural memory as a repository of doubtful and irrelevant values. The second half of the twentieth century gave this project of knowledge freed from history and cultural context a new twist. Unlike Descartes, who at least tried to build knowledge on the security of something known with certainty, post-modern thinkers have based knowledge and values – paradoxically and impossibly – on the very lack of foundations themselves. The post-modern project, based on the detonation of grand narratives and the unmasking of human agency, history, even human rights, as illusions, is today ironically at odds with the “transformation of consciousness” needed to face the planetary crisis. One of the thriving species in this foundational vacuum – present day capitalism – flings up ever new versions of Descartes’ disconnected, rootless and de-centred beings. They thrive in the free world and in authoritarian China alike, advocating *expando ergo sum* and the limitless horizons of growth.

As I have tried to argue, if there is any “heresy” in Leonardo’s world view, its basis is a pre-Cartesian “ecohumanism”, with its vision of human beings as Shakespeare’s “bi-forked animals” – both beastly and angelic – driven by reason and passion, rooted in history, memory and nature. There are several reasons for revisiting the ecohumanist wisdom today. The current global climate change threatens an intense wave of meteorological, political and economic tsunamis, all of which could have severe consequences for the survival of human civilization. The Cartesian legacy has deprived modern humanists and social science researchers of a cultural toolkit to deal with a crisis of such proportions. Much historical and environmental research today has not only divorced the studies of the Cosmos from the Polis, but has disregarded human nature as a salient factor in the historical process. The humanist tradition – focused on the ideas of a skeptical inquiry, Christian compassion and the Socratic search for the truth – has been brushed out of modern scholarship and replaced by a largely rationalist, technocratic agenda which has perverted much of modern understanding of nature, culture and human spirituality. “Human nature” – a virtual anathema in the social sciences since the second half of the twentieth century – has been relegated to an atavistic, essentialist lexicon, and replaced by the notion of personhood as a cultural construction or a bundle of selfish genes. In spite of the collapse of the communist and socialist utopias, many of the 21st century visions of a better, more earth-friendly world are still premised on the dismissal of the role played by human nature. Instead they evoke a longing to manufacture better, “greener” humans, a project which ignores the Frankenstienian consequences of social engineering. We need to attend to the greatest achievements of the Renaissance thought – the work of Leonardo, Erasmus, Shakespeare, Montaigne, and Machiavelli – which amount to a long meditation on the ways to restrain nature’s furies and stall human hubris as two sides of the same project.

In arguing the new relevance of the Renaissance inspiration for our present concerns, I take issue with the consensus that has emerged among some major historians – Peter Burke, Jacques Barzun, and William J. Bouswma – that the European Renaissance has either failed or “continues to recede from us at an accelerating rate” (Burke 1998, p.41; Barzun 2000; Bouswma 2002). What we need today is a new Renaissance, based on the recovery of nature not as a resource, but as our terrestrial home.⁶ But first of all, we need to return to the civilizational reflection which lay at the heart of the ecohumanist vision. There are reasons to believe that the current environmental crisis – that undeniable testimony to the violated interdependence of Cosmos and Polis – is as much likely to yield a new, green, post - industrial revolution, as a serious political and social breakdown in many parts of the world. The Popperian prospect of “retribalization” – and thus the return to entrenched communities and barbarous sentiments – is the most likely scenario. Such a return brings to mind Leonardo and Machiavelli’s view of human advancement. In line with the Greeks, they interpreted history as an interplay of progress and regression, a trajectory of development followed by collapse into barbarism. As a hydraulic engineer interested in human history Leonardo noted how in the ancient Roman cities life was made comfortable by plentiful water supplies via lead pipes and aqueducts built as early as 312 BC. The Romans knew toilets with sewers and

⁶ There are some conceptual and ideational shifts in the Western world at the beginning of the new millennium which indicate that the burial of the Renaissance has been premature. Certainly an awareness of the interdependence of things and the basic unity of the universe is common to both the pre-modern and emerging ecological mindset. The realization that nature is not just a resource but our terrestrial home has stimulated a shift of attention away from stability of eternal forms to diversity and adaptability. The sense of limits to human scientific and technological endeavour, found today encoded in such concepts as “sustainable development,” also suggests a return to pre-modern modes of thought. The world-wide religious revival – whether in fundamentalist, New Age or orthodox guise – testifies to a nearly global flight from arid rationality. There is an ongoing battle of books and world views in fields such as medicine, architecture and design, where imaginative, holistic and intuitive approaches are challenging the prevalent perspectives. Alongside these trends, human nature – a virtual anathema to social scientists for the past thirty years – is making a reluctant return. As Francis Fukuyama observed, “Socialism foundered because it ran into the brick wall of human nature: human beings could not be forced to be different from what they were and all of the characteristics that were supposed to have disappeared under socialism, like ethnicity and national identity reappeared after 1989 with a vengeance” (Fukuyama 1999, 27-28).

public baths. With the establishment of Constantinople and the fall of the Western empire, waves of barbarians from the North descended on Italy. Technological know-how was lost in the ensuing centuries of chaos, and it was only the engineers of the Renaissance that resumed the sanitary project. This was a clear example of technological incandescence followed by a lapse into a primitive modus. This happened not because of the economic and political decline, but because of human frailty: the lack of *prudentia* and *sapientia*.

The 21st climate crisis - caused by the very same dearth of *prudentia* and *sapientia* – calls for revisiting the old “ecohumanist” wisdom: an insight into a precarious fragility of the world without limits. The West cannot advance a vision of a more sustainable world with yet another “radical”, feel-good, relativist agenda. Neither can it save the planet by practicing a high-minded environmentalism alone. We need to reclaim both Cosmos and Polis as humanity’s one home. But first of all we need courage to defend what Leonardo called the “chief gift of nature”: human liberty. Without it, the new green “progress” may well turn into a triumphant march into yet another prison.

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