Mending the Living World - Transcript

Emmanuel Kattan [00:00:05] This is Vis-A-Vie, a podcast series brought to you by the Alliance Program at Columbia University. Vis-a-Vies features conversations that challenge our understanding of key global, economic and social issues by casting them in a transatlantic perspective. I'm Emmanuel Catin, I head the Alliance program, a partnership between Columbia University and three French universities, Sciences Po, Paris-un Panthéon Sorbonne and École Polytechnique. Every episode, I sit down face to face with, or as we say in French, vis-à-vis some of the most insightful thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic. I hope you enjoy our conversation. Debates about climate change and the environment often focus understandably on risk evaluation, mitigation and adaptation. Important research is dedicated to technological innovations like carbon capture or renewable energy, adaptive strategies to protect biodiversity or financial solutions to bolster sustainable investment. This work is important, of course. But in order to get to the root of the current climate crisis, it is equally important to question the role that we, human beings, occupy in the living world and to radically rethink our relationship with other living beings. This project is at the heart of the work of Professor Corinne Pelluchon, whom we are delighted to welcome to Visavi. Corinne Pelluchon is a professor of philosophy at Gustave Eiffel University. She specializes in moral and political philosophy and in medical, environmental, and animal ethics, addressing themes such as ecology and our relationship to nature, eco-anxiety, vulnerability, and democracy. Corinne, welcome to Vis-A-Vie.

Corine Pelluchon [00:02:02] HELLO

Emmanuel Kattan [00:02:03] So we'll start perhaps with your book called Enlightenment in the Ecological Age which was published by Ethics International Press last year and which can be read in some ways as a defense of enlightenment values and principles seen through the lens of the living world. Such a defense is needed, you argue, because the legacy of the Enlightenment is attacked on two fronts. On the one hand by anti-lightman forces rooted in nationalist anti-intellectual views of the world, and on the other hand by a post-modern relativist ideology that contests the Enlightenment's universal and universalist scope. Perhaps to start with, can you explain a little bit more what you try to achieve in this book and why the Enlightment has come under such heavy criticism and what needed really to defend it.

Corine Pelluchon [00:03:03] Well, first, it would be interesting to say that the Enlightenment is less a century or a continent than an attitude, as Michel Foucault said, which consists in considering one's presence as the object of all critical thinking in order to try to reorient the future, so the future is not fixed. And the Enlightenment is a way...

Understanding what are the challenges and the dangers we are confronted with and what kind of guidelines we could provide. So, the Enlightenment is an ongoing process which can interest each continent, each epoch, but of course there are some principles that constitute the core principle of the Enlightenment. Which is an intellectual structure which is connected with a political project. And these four principles are autonomy, so the value of the critical thinking, to the quality of human beings who can exert their critical thinking to get rid of some prejudices. So, and this is connected to the project of a democratic society and the value of reason as a tool. To help us emancipate ourselves. And of course, the idea that humanity has a unity which is expressed in human rights. So I think that these four principles which are attacked by anti-enlightenment still make sense, but it's true that we have maybe to reconfigure some of them. For instance, the importance of autonomy does make sense But what I have done... Is to take our corporeality seriously and to focus on the fact that we depend upon nature and other beings, and that our vulnerability is also something which help us reframe, reconfigure autonomy, which is not to be reduced to mere independence. The same with human rights, because the other human beings are not, of course, we have to set limits or to do whatever we please for the sake of all the human beings, but all the species, and even for me, all the sentient beings, all the animals considered as individual beings, their interests are to be taken seriously in order to build a just society. So there is an issue of justice toward animals, other speakers and other generations, future generations, and this... Shows that if we want to continue to foster the principles that are the core of enlightenment today in such a context, we have to overcome the dualism between nature and culture, human beings and animals, and not to forget the importance of the freedom of will, but to understand freedom which is transformed in light of our corporality and our interconnectedness. And I think the focus on human condition, the fact that we all need food, water, are dependent upon other beings, the fact we all are mortal and that we are born and that have always an impact upon other being when we eat and so forth, This are universal structures, which can be applied in different contexts, and of course some parts of our identity are socially constructed, but we have a human condition, and this human condition, this materiality of our existence, the fact that we, ecology is the wisdom of our dwelling on the earth, that we depend upon others, these are far-reaching consequences. And, for instance, starting from the fact that we eat, that we live from water, food and so forth, and that we always have an impact upon animals and other beings when we eat. This means that the protection of the biosphere, which is a condition of our existence, justice toward animals and future generations become new duties of the states, which has not to be reduced to security between us or the reduction of. Inequality. So I think that it's important to take into account the collapse of enlightenment after Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and the reversal of progress into regression in the 20th century. It's very important to listen to what

postmodernists has to say, but we cannot be satisfied. The rejection of any universalizable ideal, and this is why I promote an ecological enlightenment.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:08:30] And, I mean, you put your finger on this in your book when you talk about the Chème de la domination, the domination schema, which in a way, as you explain, is a form of corruption, of dévoiement, as you would say in French, of rationality. Is it also a corruption of freedom at the same time? Is the result of this process also a form of renunciation. To our fundamental freedom, which perhaps also creates a sense of responsibility towards the rest of the living being.

Corine Pelluchon [00:09:08] Yes, we could say this like that. It's true that to focus on our corporeality and dependence upon nature and other beings drives us into acknowledging that our freedom is reconfigured in light of our responsibility, which is huge because of our technological means and the fact that our modes production and our modes of life and our technologies have an impact which goes further than our present life and that we can also harm beings whose face we do not see and who do not yet exist. And how is it possible to feel responsible when we do see the face of the one upon which we inflict harm. I think this is very challenging, but it's true that for me, of course, in order to achieve the ecological transition, we have to change some structural, we to foster some structural changes, especially in economy and the modes of production and agriculture and so forth. But I do insist upon the a self-transformation which is required and this self- transformation is not unintellectual. It also means that we uproot the scheme of domination. This self- Transformation requires an enlargement of the self so that we deeply feel that we are not an empire within an empire and that the well-being of others are part Thank you very much. Have a great day. Well-being. And so I have tried to describe all the elements of this self-transformation, which is intellectual, but also whose key is the reconciliation of our nature with our begotten nature. I think that we, in our human condition, have a lot of resources to gain this maturity which is required in order to uh... Set limits to all right to do it ever to be pleased and to have a rationship with also is uh... Including animals which is not as violent and i think that aggressively to the violence toward beings which are who reduced to corporalities such as women since animal is due to the fact that we reject or corporate t or that uh... We we we cannot stand the idea that we are mortal. And I think that this is one of the reasons why we have so many difficulties to live in peace with others and to have a relationship with nature and other beings which is not like a war.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:12:18] And is that why phenomenology is so important to you, because it seems to me that it brings together the two aspects that you mentioned, the intellectual process whereby we can take a step back and become self-critical in terms of our own position with regards to the world, but at the same time, phenomenology

engages us to return to things themselves and therefore to a a much more intimate and perhaps even more emotional relationship with the world and our existence as bodies.

Corine Pelluchon [00:12:58] Yes, we could say that. It's true that the phenomenological approach is not a third discourse, a discourse in the third person. It is a discourse of the first person. And it's true that if environmental ethics did not succeed in changing our lifestyles nor policies, in spite of its creativity, its ability to provide guidelines, the notion of intrinsic value, ecocentrism and so forth. Why did it not succeed to change our lifestyles and economic structures? Maybe because it was a little bit abstract, and because there is this discrepancy between theory and practice. And it is true that a lot of people are aware of the dangers of climate change and know what we could do. There are a lot of reports which testify to the abilities we have to change economies and so forth, but at the individual and collective level, we do not change a lot of things. And in order to reduce this gap between behavior and consciousness or theory and practice, we have to maybe understand the importance of the experience of nature. And we have to focus on the concrete motivations of people. And this goes beyond phenomenology. But phenomenology, because it's the emotion, maybe moral traits which are required to have another relationship with others, which is not a relationship of dominion and so forth. But the phenomenological approach for me is very important because first, when it's It's a phenomenology of corporeality, it provides, it provide some... Are universalizable guidelines. For instance, I spoke of eating, which shed lights upon all relational conditions. The fact that we always have an impact upon others, including animals, and this has normative effects. And this is universalizable, um, guidelines, but we can apply them according to the diversity of context and also when we speak, like Anne Arendt, of the fact that we are born. I deepen this point. We are born in a world which is older than us and which is larger than us and which encompasses also the other beings and cultural and natural heritage. And in fact, this means that we live also for the world, not only for us, there is something which transcends. Individual life.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:15:57] And in fact, this experience of the world that you describe, you analyze in great detail in your book L'être et la mer pour un existentialisme écologique, heading out to sea and ecological existentialism. And I was really interested in this book in the way in which you decenter human beings away from the earth, the land and into the sea. In order, I understand, that's how I understood it, to force us to rethink how we engage with other living beings in a world that is, to some extent, unfamiliar. You give very concrete examples, also, of encounters with other, living beings. For example, you describe how the oceanographer, Anita Conti, was transformed. By looking into the eye of a shark. I mean, it's a fascinating passage in your book where, you know, you show that empathy actually emerged from not so much

from her observing the shark, but from the shark observing her. And then there's another example that you gave invoking the writer Julio Cortesar, who has a short story about a man who comes face to face with axolotls. These small salamander-like creatures. He was in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, and he saw them swimming in an aquarium. And you write, and I quote, the gaze of the captive axolotls accuses the narrator and topples his conscience, so much so that he becomes himself, in spirit, an axoloto. How does this? Theory of ecological existentialism that you advocate for, how does it transform our relationship with animals? How does it help us reinvent the way in which we engage with other living beings?

Corine Pelluchon [00:18:06] First of all, the point in ecology is to de-center ourselves, and it's quite difficult. Like a lot of people, I focused before on our terrestrial condition, that's right, food, the dwelling on earth, and so forth, but it was a kind of coexistentialism. But I I had forgotten the sea And well, water is an element upon which we depend and we are made of water, but we cannot live in water. Moreover, the sea is fascinating, but also we have a bivalent relationship with the sea. And it's associated in each culture with rebirth. But also with death, with danger, with motherhood. So, well, it's as bivalent as ourselves, Victor Hugo said. And for me to head out in sea, to understand nature ourselves, not from offshore, but to understand us starting from the sea. Well, change... Completely changes our perspective and dissent, radically dissenters ourselves. And the principle of the marine ontology I tried to develop was the unity of the ocean, because in the 40s, there was an oceanographer who said that, well, of course we speak of different ocean, but in fact, there is one ocean and it is before the land. So the land, well all countries are not blocks of granites with water, but they are like islands. So I wanted to explore the submersive, the fact that our lands and our psyche are submersible. And I wanted to say that existentialism could be a resource and it's paradoxical because existentialism focused, focused on freedom, a project like Sartre. And they did not speak a lot about animals except, well there is an exception, Merleau-Ponty, which is a great philosopher. But he might not be happy to be called an existentialist. But, and it's true that in Sartres and Simone de Beauvoir, or relationship with the others. Are characterized by conflictuality, l'enfer c'est les autres. Well, but when we understand our relationship with animals, it's true that sometimes there are some predators, as well when Val Plumehood explains that she was attacked by a crocodile. But it's rare. Most of the time, it's curiosity. This kind of otherness that we encounter, and Anita Conti explains very well this idea of a being who is different but who does not want to eat her, who does well, and also in Axolot, in the story of Julien Cortazart. It's, well, something which is very important for me, our responsibility toward other animals, and something they accuse us, even although they do not speak in a language we are able to understand, they accuse what are we doing, and this axolot, they are in a box. They are, they're sufferer, but they have a mute suffering, and the fact

that he's able to suffer from their suffering changes him from. Changes is identity, and it's a very moving experience, and I think that this ecological existentialism I try to advocate is a journey in the sea, and of course in order to reframe or relationship with animals, but it's true also that when we work in animal ethics, fishes... Are neglected or axolot as well and I wanted also to speak of whales and so forth and to say that there is an epiphany, the other animal has an otherness, it's not, he has an individuality and he says I cannot, I cannot grasp him and what he says to me is, don't kill me. I think that for me it's very important and I try to describe this.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:23:29] And vulnerability is probably another key word, central concept, in your thinking. You, of course, quote Emmanuel Levinas and the way in which he conceives of the ethical relation as a relationship, the encounter with the infinite vulnerability of the other. I wonder whether vulnerability is also constitutive of our relationship with with animals and with other living beings. And do you think that that vulnerability is what creates our responsibility? Or is it something more complex than this? Are we the wardens of the world, or is the relationship more reciprocal than what it appears?

Corine Pelluchon [00:24:23] Well, responsibility is a passivity in Levinas, so it's not an obligation, which is a consequence of something I've chosen, but it's a shock. Responsibility does not erase or exclude my selfhood. It's a contrary, it reframes my self-hood, my freedom is invested, he says. So, it's not only conceived as the ability to make choices and to change them. But it's also an answer to a situation, and it's an answer through a call, and it is a personal answer to somebody which is individualized. And it's not, there is no, it's no, there is not way of waiting for the society's answer. Of course, they are very important, but I am the one who answers and who are called. And if I don't answer, it's also an answer, which constitutes me. And the way that this is the supremacy of responsibility over freedom in Levinas. And it goes further when he speaks of substitution, because it's, also, the fact that I could be responsible for the responsibility of the other, even when this other inflicts me harm. It is to say that I'm not guilty, but the bad actions of the others are like a burden which changes from within my innocence. And for me, it was very important because, well, Levinas is one of my masters. And I come to understand a little bit what he said. When I was thinking of animals, he was not very interested in such issues, but it's true that for me the animal cause is important for them, but also it has a strategic dimension. What we are doing to this sentient being that we cannot reduce to machines, what we doing to them is something that sheds light on us and that reveals who we are. This is very important, so the responsibility is a very, very strong word, which is a way of reframing or understanding of selfhood, which isn't self-centered. And I think it's not connected with the idea of reciprocity. Reciprocity is very important when we speak for the ethics of

care, which of course understand asymmetry, but I am responsible for the one who is fragile and vulnerable, who is dependent. But in Levinas, I think it's a little bit different.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:27:30] I had a personal question to ask you because you talk a lot, you write a great deal and very eloquently about human relationships to animals, but I was curious whether you might be able to tell us a little bit more about your own personal relationship to animals and how you encounter animals. I mean, I don't suspect that you go to the zoo every Saturday morning, but uh, but, uh,

Corine Pelluchon [00:27:54] I don't eat meat.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:27:56] But for example, do you encounter animals, you know, in forests and I mean, is that that how you, you know, basically bind that relationship or?

Corine Pelluchon [00:28:07] Well, I was born, yeah, I do have one, but I was born in the country and so I know animals when I was in the country as a child and so forth. But it's true that I became vegetarian, well, 25 years ago, for environmental issues, but also for animal welfare. And well, I have changed my lifestyles because of these issues. But it's true that I spent a lot of time meeting patients and making things in hospitals. My first writings were about end of life and medical ethics. This was a laboratory of the ethics of vulnerability I developed and further. And it's true that during this encounter with very vulnerable people dying, people who were dying from cancer and so forth, or who were suffering from isomal disease or cognitive impairs, I was looking for a kind of ethics which could understand, which could reconfigure autonomy, understand selfhood and autonomy without reducing autonomy to competence, to cognitive. Capacities. And I came and I re-read Levinas in this context. And finding in totality and infinity, but above all in otherness and autre manquette, finding the importance of vulnerability as a passivity, alteration of my body, but also as the openness to the and the ability to be concerned by the others. And I came back to home, to my house, and I was thinking about that. I was already vegetarian, and that I wanted to know everything, because you cannot speak of vulnerability, and at the same time forgetting those who are as vulnerable as us, who are dying, who are suffering from disease and so forth, and whom we are inflicting excruciating pain, and then I became kidnapped. By this cause. I was already vegetarian, but then, at this time, I did not develop my own approach concerning animals. It came before, and I was kidnapped by this question, which became something bigger than me, which became something that changes from within all my night.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:31:01] And it's interesting that you came to this realization by encountering human vulnerability.

Corine Pelluchon [00:31:08] Yeah, and being changed by their vulnerability and engaging sometimes a mute relationship with people suffering from cognitive impairs and their families and a lot of things which are very difficult to describe, but which are very important. And I have worked a lot on on death, grieving, and it's true. I think that I understood also that to open the eye and to face the animal suffering, it's so big. It's so painful that I understand that people don't want to see that and repress this. Because for me, it was a nightmare, and I understand people who... Don't want to see this. And this has helped me to write Animal Manifesto in which I also provide some guidelines that could help us alleviate the animal suffering in a democracy where there are differences of interests and of representations. And because so, but it's true that this work with patients and so forth, and this encounter with the ulcer's vulnerability and with mine, of course. And it's true as framed from within my own approach of the animal question.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:32:52] Thank you so much, Corinne Pelluchon, you've given us a lot to think about and thank you for these very generous and very rich ideas.

Corine Pelluchon [00:33:01] Thank you very much.

Emmanuel Kattan [00:33:05] Vis-à-vis is brought to you by The Alliance Program, a partnership between Columbia University, Paris-Union-Panthéon Sorbonne, Sciences Po, and École Polytechnique. This podcast is produced by Rachel Kahn and Georgia O'Neill, and I'm Emmanuel Katan. Special thanks to Esther Jackson and her colleagues at Columbia Libraries. If you like what you hear, please leave us a review on your podcast platform. If you're interested in learning more about The Alliance program, and how we support academic exchanges, research and collaboration between the US and France, please visit us at alliance.columbia.edu or follow us on Facebook and Instagram. Make sure to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks so much for listening.