

## A REFLECTION UPON “WALDEN”: ECOLOGICAL AND MORAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN A NEW LIGHT

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**ABSTRACT.** In this article I do not intend to make a review on the work of the American transcendentalist but, rather, to capture different aspects of the subjective self through which a moral and ecological core is formed. The practical importance of my work is obvious, since nowadays there is no environmental ethics article in which there can't be found, at least once, references to the exacerbation of the Anthropocene era, to nature deficit disorder (a term invented by Richard Louv in his brilliant book, *Last Child in the Woods*), nature knowledge deficit, alienation, a culture of control and the will of domination. The lifestyle proposed by David Thoreau can be taken into consideration as a model for what we call “a good and flourishing life”, a virtuous life connected to natural surroundings. In fact, “*Walden, or Life in the Woods*” is about the love for nature seen as a sign of self-love. Having assumed his madness, a brave plunge into a space of beauty and uncertainties, of purity and honesty, Thoreau dares to dream big, to explore a world of removal from a mechanical society, to enter a space of lucidity and personal development. Next, I will explain in detail my view on the multiple meanings that Thoreau catches during his residence in the cabin from the shore of the Walden Lake near Concord, Massachusetts. For the beginning, I propose an imaginative drift, in which we could transpose ourselves, even if only for a few minutes, in a natural universe similar with the one Thoreau describes in his book. Otherwise, the incursion in the moral space of the ethics of care that dominates Thoreau's experience will be a simple, empty theoretical construct, lacking in colour and flavour.

**Keywords:** *Thoreau, Walden, environmental ethics, virtue, experiential, ecologic, morality.*

### 1. Introduction

The beauty of nature can express itself in an infinity of manifestation forms. The texture of light caressing the organic trunks of the trees, moss and lichens, the sound of silence urge to introspection, the air with its freshness, perfumed by phytoncides energizes the body and provokes the mind to be still, to detach from

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the urban rush. The smell of wetland, of mushrooms, of flowers contributes to the sketching of a magical yet real space. The dance of the wind creates music. Higher notes inspire, lower notes ground the individual, rooting him deeply. Every tree has its own personality, its own story and energy. The most interesting fact is that all these elements are related in a Unity of things and phenomena, coexisting and forming a single organism with multiple forms of manifestation.

The roots of trees stabilize the soil and create a space of unity of all things, in which we all have an important role and an intrinsic value, a purpose and interests. The understanding of harmony and essential communication implies the understanding of the fact that every element contributes to the value of the whole system. The rabbit that runs on the fields, the trunk of the damask rose that grows red and meaty fruits, the high of the mountains- all of these contribute to the drawing of this wide natural landscape. Nature is a source of renewal, knowledge, inspiration, nurture and joy.

Thoreau leaves the space of comfort, of conformism and unjustified fears and transposes himself, not only in imagination like we did before, in a new context. Nature represents a test for the validation of some moral principles and for questioning other implicit assumptions about the world. The key-words here are self-discovery and radical honesty with oneself. The author is also open to the possibility of experiencing failure, to accepting the uncertainties as a “gift” that has to be accepted. A real test of knowledge can only start where the comfort space ends, in a territory of dissonance. As Homes Rolston III claimed,

“Nature is a vast scene of birth and death, springtime and harvest, permanence and change; of budding, flowering, fruiting, and withering away; of processive unfolding; of pain and pleasure; of success and failure; of ugliness giving way to beauty and beauty to ugliness. From the contemplation of it we get a feeling for life's transient beauty sustained over chaos. There is a music to it all—and not the least when in a minor key. Though we are required to spend our lives in struggle, yet we are able to cherish the good Earth and accept the kind of world in which we find ourselves. We are finding out who we are by finding out where we are and how we are emplaced there.”<sup>1</sup>

For Thoreau, nature is a test of resilience and adapting to pure beauty and fascination of wild and untamed delights and things. A reality that is perfectly safe and predictable does not stimulate the individual to change, to grow and to be

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<sup>1</sup> Rolston III, Holmes. 2005, “Environmental Virtue Ethics: Half the Truth but Dangerous as a Whole”, in Ronald Sandier, Philip Cafaro (editor). *Environmental Virtue Ethics*. (Lanham. MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers), p. 64.

honest with oneself. A rigid structure applied to the concrete experience does not allow the spontaneous to arise and, also, blocks the free flow of the instinct's energies and of the will. Taking the variables into consideration and adjusting to the context, here and now, Thoreau's life becomes fluid. A freeze into an existential project of "being-interpreted" (*Augelegtheit*) cancels the possibility of a trenchantly assuming of the escape from the world of common space.

## 2. Solitude, freedom and self-congruence

This is one of the main ideas of humanistic psychology, related especially to Carl Rogers, who sees the separation from defensiveness as an important step for a proper valorisation of the relationship with our own self, for self-congruence. In "On Becoming a Person", the American psychologist believes that the concept of a "good life" is based on the idea of total letting go, a liberation from bad thoughts and fears. Thus, he says that "It seems to me that the good life is not any fixed state. It is not, in my estimation, a state of virtue, or contentment, or nirvana, or happiness. It is not a condition in which the individual is adjusted, or fulfilled, or actualized. To use psychological terms, it is not a state of drive-reduction, or tension-reduction, or homeostasis."<sup>2</sup> Here we can see the beauty of nature, in the fact that by being placed in a space of constraints and challenges, you meet yourself in a brand new state. In this new positioning towards the self and the world, it is necessary to discover yourself without lying. The journey to yourself starts at the end of the comfort zone. The revalorization of the relationship with your own beliefs, values and principles is stimulated by the removal from an advantageous context and placing oneself in an approach which requests change.

The big picture perspective requires flexibility, a radical openness and a safe space for expressing the states of the self. The scenery of this incursion is being made clear in this passage, in which Thoreau points out the real stakes of his adventure:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath

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<sup>2</sup>Rogers, Carl. 1961, "On becoming a person. A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy", Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, USA. p. 185-186.

and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.”<sup>3</sup>

It is exactly what Walt Whitman, in a passage from *Leaves of Grass* said: “Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons, it is to grow in the open air, and to eat and sleep with the earth.”<sup>4</sup> This brave attitude facilitates the rise of trustworthy relationships between man and the natural environment; the daily chatter disappears, creating a wide space for a profound communication. In the chapter “Solitude”, Thoreau replies to those who might consider that loneliness means the splitting from the Unity, a possible desertion of a world of symbols and meanings. His practical and moral project is also an attempt to establish a valuable dialogue with the earth he’s sitting on, the air he’s breathing, the sky above him. Thoreau speaks about these things like this: “This whole earth which we inhabit is but a point in space.

How far apart, think you, dwell the two most distant inhabitants of yonder star, the breadth of whose disk cannot be appreciated by our instruments? Why should I feel lonely? Is not our planet in the Milky Way? This which you put seems to me not to be the most important question. What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another. What do we want most to dwell near to? Not too many men surely...”<sup>5</sup> His solution is the understanding of the fact that every living being is caught in a metaphysical order, in a web of interrelations and in a world of interconnectivities.

So, in this view, nobody is isolated, excluded, alienated from nature. Thoreau feels that he is anchored in a world with meanings, adopting a holistic and systemic approach to the environment. The personal self is connected with the Cosmic self, with the Great Silence, as Native Americans called it. This identification with the Oneness is extremely valuable, because it allows the harmonization of personal laws with the laws of nature and with universal laws. This way, the self is surrounded by a world which he recognizes. In this context, the sadness and the defensiveness disappear. As Thoreau says, “There can be no very black melancholy to him who

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<sup>3</sup> Thoreau. David, Henry. 2004 (originally in 1854), “*Walden, or Life in The Woods*”, The Internet Bookmobile Edition, Text from the Library of America edition: *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers ; Walden, or, Life in the Woods ; The Maine Woods ; Cape Cod*, by Henry David Thoreau, Edited by Robert F. Sayre, p. 68-69.

<sup>4</sup> Whitman, Walt. 1961, “*Leaves of Grass*”, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, (1860), p. 319.

<sup>5</sup> Thoreau. David, Henry. “*Walden, or Life in the Woods*”, p. 100.

lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still. There was never yet such a storm but it was eolian music to a healthy and innocent ear. Nothing can rightly compel a simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness. While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me. The gentle rain which waters my beans and keeps me in the house to-day is not drear and melancholy, but good for me too. Though it prevents my hoeing them, it is of far more worth than my hoeing.”<sup>6</sup>

The element of solitude repeats itself in almost all of the content of Thoreau’s work. Actually, it is not solitude but rather a perfect form of communicating through silence, through listening. Silence is a language. Silence inspires, in the context lived by Thoreau, both a spiritual and a moral order, a connection to the archaic elements of expressing the beauty of nature that have a sacramental value. This reminds me of the words of a native American who was talking about silence, succeeding in summarizing the words of Thoreau. Mato Ohanko (Fast Bear) says that:

“If you listen carefully at night, you will hear the creatures of the darkness. All sacred- the owls, the crickets, the frogs, and you will listen to wonderful songs. Listen with your heart. Never stop listening!”<sup>7</sup>

Nature is, in this context, the real temple of ascension. Nature generates a space that facilitates this type of sublime communication.

### 3. Simplicity as an environmental virtue

The author criticizes the luxury and the convenience in a vast part of his work, considering that our big houses are hiding small souls and a bunch of vices that we are masking easily. We are, maybe, excellent sophists but weak philosophers, capable of hiding the losses in our lives and unable to recognize our own helplessness, our own failures. The luxury Thoreau talks about can be recognized in the way we choose to dress: expensive clothes that cover a self-sufficient attitude.

The domestication of our experiences and wishes transform the freedom of expression and the will to play into an internal implosion that leads to an unfortunate state of uprooting and loneliness. The culture of expensive houses fails in producing a socio-cultural and moral culture that is generous, a firm structure in its essence. As Thoreau observes in the first chapter, “Economy”, “while civilization has been

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<sup>6</sup> Thoreau, David, Henry. *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, p. 98.

<sup>7</sup> *The Songs of Life –Native American Wisdom* 2012, Bucharest, Helen Exley Com. Publishing.

improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them. It has created palaces, but it was not so easy to create noble men and kings.”<sup>8</sup> We are unable to see the sky because of our homes with roofs, small, stifling universes expressing our weakness and fears, spaces in which the possibility of movement and development is limited. The temples, as Thoreau considers, are not necessarily the expression of a high degree of wisdom or a sign of a genius creator. The strong wish to build these masterpieces is a childish ambition. Thoreau asks: “It should not be by their architecture, but why not even by their power of abstract thought, that nations should seek to commemorate themselves?”<sup>9</sup>, considering that “Nations are possessed with an insane ambition to perpetuate the memory of themselves by the amount of hammered stone they leave. What if equal pains were taken to smooth and polish their manners?”

One piece of good sense would be more memorable than a monument as high as the moon. I love better to see stones in place.”<sup>10</sup> The moral understanding of communion and simplicity is one of the essential elements that consolidate an ethical, sustainable and friendly moral culture. Environmental ethics can be developed by considering the necessity of the existence of a frame for communication between man and nature. The responsibility of being aware of the surroundings, the capacity of interpreting the context is vital, being an underlying condition for understanding the natural world.

Thoreau sees in the mechanization of modern individual the expression of a moral with no devotion, in which the moral agent distances himself from the outer world, expressing a state of rigidity, of lack of compassion and emotional investment. The natural environment is placed on the edge of our interests, an exposed territory, subject to our hedonistic pleasures and ambition. We find these ideas in the philosophical literature of post-modernism, both at Heidegger, Gilles Lipovetsky, Herbert Marcuse or Hannah Arendt. They all observe the increasing distance between the modern man and the original natural world, a seclusion and a dissolution of morality into a mass-culture. The decomposition of the primary speech about the world brings upon an ethical reform: the pre-technological culture is invalidated by a culture of extraction, processing and consuming. In this equation, the phenomenon of art trivialization is constantly increasing, and the nature becomes de-erotized, transformed into “the concept of nature” or “the image of nature”. The sacredness of the environment and the intrinsic value of things become outdated. As Roland Barthes observed, “Nature becomes a discontinuum of solitary

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<sup>8</sup> Thoreau. David, Henry. *“Walden, or Life in the Woods”*, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Thoreau. David, Henry. *“Walden, or Life in the Woods”*, p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p.44.

and terrible objects because they have only virtual links. No one chooses for them a privileged meaning or use or service. No one reduces them to mean a mental attitude or an intention, that is to say, in the last analysis, a tenderness..."<sup>11</sup>.

The urban, modern man loses his tenderness and capacity for awe and wonder, becoming a misfit social character, whose safety is strictly guarded inside the walls of his proprieties and goods. Wonder and awe are two of the fundamental aesthetic attitudes that are linked to the virtues of a moral human-nature relationship. As Jordan and Kristjánsson said, "Feelings of awe and wonder are an essential component of any virtue addressing the human-nature relationship. Wonder of the natural world is not only associated with feelings of aesthetic appreciation, rejuvenation, fascination or delight, but as described above, involves being part of something larger than the self, a sense of being part of a complex ecosystem. These emotional elements are integral to the motivational aspects of virtues."<sup>12</sup> Or, as Rachel Carson said, "Wonder and humility are wholesome emotions, and they do not exist side by side with a lust for destruction"<sup>13</sup>. For Carson, wonder is a preeminent environmental virtue, one that enriches human's life:

"It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood ... I should ask that ... each child in the world be [given] a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, and alienation from the sources of our strength."<sup>14</sup>

Thoreau wants to avoid the predictable and the common space of ignorance. The cabin he builds in the woods is the expression of simplicity, a moral virtue which permits the state of feeling good with your own person without consuming too many resources for finding happiness. The wish of feeling the environment with all your senses and of understanding the importance of caring for every natural element opposes to the idea of objectification of the world. The key elements change: from "having" to "being", from using to protecting and being

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<sup>11</sup> Roland Barthes, 1963, *Le Degre zero de l'écriture*, Editions de Seuil, Paris, p.72. The original text is "La Nature y devient un discontinu d'objets solitaires et terribles, parcequ'ils n'ont que des liaisons virtuelles; personne ne choisit pour eux un sens privilégié ou un emploi ou un service, personne ne les réduit à la signification d'un comportement mental ou d'une intention, c'est-à-dire finalement d'une tendresse ...".

<sup>12</sup> Jordan, Karen; Kristján, Kristjánsson. 2016, „ *Sustainability, virtue ethics, and the virtue of harmony with nature*”, Environmental Education Research. p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Carson, Rachel, 1999. "Design for Nature Writing," in L. Lear (ed.), *Lost Woods: The Discovered Writings of Rachel Carson*. Boston: Beacon, p. 94.

<sup>14</sup> Carson, Rachel, 1956. "The Sense of Wonder". New York: Harper & Row, p.42-43.

responsible, a mature and responsible approach. The miracle of merely observing, with a total openness replaces the materialistic pleasure of accumulating goods. This is the Archimedean point of Thoreau's experience, and the whole Universe of engaging into a meaningful life project spins around it. It is all about *being rightly oriented towards nature*, a phrase used by Rosalind Hurst house which involves an

“...indefinite range of reasons taught for responding, in the broadest sense, to nature, in certain ways. These include, at least, wondering at, looking hard at, finding out more about, rejoicing in, understanding why other people spend their whole lives studying, being anxious to preserve, not dismissing or ignoring or destroying or forgetting or assuming one can always put a price on...everything in the natural world.”<sup>15</sup>

The respect for the value of life makes Thoreau more attentive to the dynamics and changes of the natural processes around the lake. The act of observing the external world is a good occasion for the hermeneutics of his own internal dynamic. The attention for order, placing things in their right places and choosing the right moments are all lessons for a school of living, of care, respect, harmony and sensitivity. The personal biorhythm fuses with the ecological and natural rhythms of the environment. To be in harmony with nature represents a holistic thinking which emphasizes the fact that humans are encompassed by nature. The opposite, the vice of being in ‘disharmony with nature’, is a term used to represent emotional reactions that we often experience in relation to environmental damage like deforestation, or oil spills. The type of personality related to the vice of being in disharmony with nature is an instrumental one, with a non-ecological worldview and thinking, characterized by insensibility, intrusive and unyielding behaviour, neurotic and dominant, with no respect for the integrity of the ecosystems.

#### **4. Harmony in nature. Communicating by listening**

Thoreau is free to live his feelings subjectively, to discover himself with no fears or misconceptions. The genuineness of this lucid meeting with his own being is a sincere one, a result of his own choices, of his own will. The point of this observation is that caring for nature starts from the care you show for your own life, the habits in it and the way you value the natural environment. To be in pace

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<sup>15</sup> Hursthouse, Rosalind. 2007. “*Environmental Virtue Ethics.*” in *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, edited by R. L. Walker and P. J. Ivanhoe, 155–171. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 167.



with yourself means stability concerning the universe surrounding you. The interest we have for our own self is an interest we manifest for the whole natural world. There is no such thing as personal devotion without a holistic devotion and care for all living beings, for the systemic structure of life. "Environmental virtues, as achieved by humans, will initially involve concern for human quality of life. But our deeper ethical achievement needs to focus on values as intrinsic achievements in wild nature. These virtues within us need to attend to values without us. Perhaps one starts with a love of nature that is tributary to self-love. Later one discovers that this self-love is quite inclusive, for the health of myriad nonhumans is implicated, entwined with ours. One is called to an active concern and positive engagement with the object of encounter. The other cannot be seen simply as a source of personal transformation. We must make the model at least an ellipse with two foci: human virtue and natural value."<sup>16</sup>

Against the hypocrisy, insensibility and conformism, Thoreau believes that the proper attitude is one of kindness and modesty. Being in touch with nature is a way of passing from the state of hiding and ignorance to the Light, just like Plato's characters from the cave of shadows. The wisdom comes from thinking on your own, without twaddle or lost time, from encouraging a vision of trusting the intuition and senses. The natural environment facilitates, through silence, serenity and beauty, the access to another type of communication. This kind of communication does not require words, but rather feelings and being in the moment totally, here and now.

Similar to Thoreau, one hundred years later, Aldous Huxley pointed out in *The Doors of Perception* that

"This given reality is an infinite which passes all understanding and yet admits of being directly and in some sort totally apprehended. It is a transcendence belonging to another order than the human, and yet it may be present to us as a felt immanence, an experienced participation. To be enlightened is to be aware, always, of total reality in its immanent otherness - to be aware of it and yet to remain in a condition to survive as an animal, to think and feel as a human being, to resort whenever expedient to systematic reasoning. Our goal is to discover that we have always been where we ought to be. Unfortunately, we make this task exceedingly difficult for ourselves."<sup>17</sup>

In nature, the elements communicate with one another simply by being. The sublime colours and vibes of a dawn speak for themselves, there is no need for intermediaries, for an articulate dialogue or a lofty vocabulary: a sunset is beautiful and communicates through its beauty. There is no need for words. Huxley again

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<sup>16</sup> Rolston III, Holmes. 2005, „*Environmental Virtue Ethics: Half the Truth but Dangerous as a Whole*, p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> Huxley, Aldous. 2012, "*The Doors of Perception. Heaven and Hell*", Polirom, Iasi, p. 78.

says: „We can never dispense with language and the other symbol systems; for it is by means of them, and only by their means, that we have raised ourselves above the brutes, to the level of human beings. But we can easily become the victims as well as the beneficiaries of these systems. We must learn how to handle words effectively; but at the same time we must preserve and, if necessary, intensify our ability to look at the world directly and not through that half opaque medium of concepts, which distorts every given fact into the all too familiar likeness of some generic label or explanatory abstraction.”<sup>18</sup> Thoreau is not interested in debates, controversy and sophistry. He needs an essential and profound type of understanding the environment, beginning from a state of deliberate observation, with no particular reason or purpose. That is the right state to initiate a connection with the forest, birds, the ground. In the chapter “Where I lived, and what I lived for”, Thoreau said that “The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it.”<sup>19</sup> Laying on the ground, or sitting in the door’s threshold, watching the movement of branches, listening carefully to the dance of the falling leaves- Thoreau is present in the moment, the time is enjoyed at it’s real intensity.

The philosopher wants to be richer by experience, not to validate himself through some theories or concepts. The experience validates by its present, not through some meta-analysis. While the man who is searching for savings loses his condition of being part of the natural environment, Thoreau finds himself in the depth of his feelings and in the solitude of the woods, to recover the lost natural poetry of understanding the Unity of elements. While everybody wishes for a higher living standard, Thoreau chooses the quality of life. The promise of the first is success, but the quality of life is to let yourself be absorbed by the moment, to live freely in your own way. In an era of prosperity and labour, Thoreau comes with a moral alternative: enjoying the things you have, without making efforts to hold what you can’t afford. Human flourishing is, in this case, the expression of a good relationship with your desires and wills, openness to your feelings and personal balance, with an accent to the virtues of simplicity and courage.

## 5. Labour as a physical virtue

For Thoreau, labour is a means of self-disclosure, a way of testing some skills and learning new ones. This aspect is extremely important because in the process of problem solving that can occur, the capacity to know how to use your body and mind is vital. It is clear that, from this point of view, the experiential model

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<sup>18</sup> Huxley, Aldous. *“The Doors of Perception. Heaven and Hell”*, p. 74.

<sup>19</sup> Thoreau. David, Henry. *“Walden, or Life in the Woods”*, p. 64.

promoted by Thoreau is a generous one, full of examples. From constructing the cabin with his own hands, manufacturing the furniture to landscaping for being cultivate, planting the seeds and coordinating all the processes to harvest the vegetables and storage them (peas, potatoes, kidney beans, turnips and corn)-Thoreau is ready to invest his energy, time and creativity for developing the micro-universe he is living in.

Therefore, work is a physical virtue, together with health, vigour and chastity. By work, Thoreau creates an alchemy of ideas into facts, and the results are remarkable, succeeding in producing enough to feed him without lacking anything, and even to trade with other cottagers. He does not feel like a slave of his own needs: on the contrary, work helps him discover the potential of the ground, water, learn about natural rhythms, laws, cycles, developmental stages and ripening. The work is grounding him, making him feel that he deserves the results, that he is entitled to have what he invested in, an idea that is similar to the one of natural state, proposed by John Locke. When he works the soil and touches the ground, Thoreau heals himself, having the sense of connection to the source all the things came from. The outdoors is not dangerous, dirty and inaccessible; on contrary, it is a way of revealing the beauty of the natural world.

The primitiveness and civilization are found, together, in the work of the American transcendentalist. The ecological and moral consciousness, linked with the respect and care for the world we are living in, are at the core of Thoreau's experiences. The virtue of simplicity is, again, prominent. Life has to be simplified to leave enough space for rest, easy lectures, magical vibes. The things that take too much time are taking away lifetime. The wasted time is not coming back. That's why Thoreau decided to attract only the things that are worth living for: the silence of the mind, work, the freedom of producing new ideas, the comfortable feeling of being the master of your own destiny and the mental elasticity of letting yourself go with the flow, just like a modern Heraclitus. The two states do not exclude each other, but they represent the yin and yang of creation.

“Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail.”<sup>20</sup>

The simplification of life by making the life easier comes with a revalorization of the human-natural environment relationship, because it requires a process of rethinking the will to consume the resources, together with the real needs of the

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<sup>20</sup> Thoreau. David, Henry. “*Walden, or Life in the Woods*”, p. 69.

individual. Less things necessary to be happy, less natural resources needed for satisfying the needs. As he said, "When I think of the benefactors of the race, whom we have apotheosized as messengers from heaven, bearers of divine gifts to man, I do not see in my mind any retinue at their heels, any car-load of fashionable furniture."<sup>21</sup>

## 6. Food for body, mind and spirit

The food for the soul needs to be abundant, and the food for the body is to be simplified, adapted to the needs. To eat and to feed are two different things. For Thoreau, the vegetables produced by him, the cakes baked on a shingle, salt pork, fish, together with wild and juicy fruits, the pine buds tea, or the sweet honey represents food sources that he used during his stay in the forest. Thoreau thinks that the hunting and meat consumption are attributes of human instincts, a carnal and primitive need of killing. But for a man willing to have a spiritual life, killing the animals and the greed are barriers for a moral growth and strength. As Thoreau says, "I believe that every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food, and from much food of any kind"<sup>22</sup>, claiming that "I have no doubt that it is a part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized."<sup>23</sup>

*Primum non nocere*, to quote a Latin saying. First of all, do not harm. Try to do all the good you're capable of. This is the source of kindness, and to kill is a vice of a necrophilous personality, that is happy only through total possession of another. Admiring without possessing, eating without killing, being without hurting- these are the main principles of a moral consciousness, and Thoreau tries to respect their essence. Freedom is not synonymous with indulging in physical desires, but rather, it means to assume a role in guiding your own life and to care about others. Freedom is linked with the responsibility of the amount of things we consume, hunt, the way we use goods. Oppositely, a necrophilous personality has a desire to control and dominate. In Erich Fromm's words,

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<sup>21</sup> Idem, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 160.

<sup>23</sup> Thoreau, David, Henry. "Walden, or Life in the Woods", p. 161.

“while life is characterized by growth in a structured, functional manner, the necrophilous person loves all that does not grow, all that is mechanical. The necrophilous person is driven by the desire to transform the organic into the inorganic, to approach life mechanically, as if all living persons were things. Memory, rather than experience; having, rather than being, is what counts. The necrophilous person can relate to an object, a flower or a person, only if he possesses it; hence a threat to his possession is a threat to himself; if he loses possession he loses contact with the world. ... He loves control, and in the act of controlling he kills life.”<sup>24</sup>

Creating a way of life in which the individual has a purpose in possessing things is, in Thoreau’s view, a waste of time and vital energy. Man should care about his soul, about how much good he can do and how much kindness he is able to share, about his honesty. The real challenge for the human mind is to govern the vices and to cultivate patience, to master the art of listening, to search for an existence full of potential, beauty, delight and sensitivity. This attitude allows the individual to open to a profound, spiritual and holistic approach to natural environments, a space in which the material things have their own spiritual and moral reality and meaning. Thus, the human being does not lie, cheat, there is no desire for hiding oneself; this is an exercise of honesty and integrity. This is, maybe, a necessary condition for living life in a radical amazement, a fully spiritual journey in which the natural environment becomes a space of fascination and a return to the times of pure amazement from childhood. William Blake, in “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” saw this idea of wonder this way: “There was a time when meadow, grove and stream, / The Earth, and every common sight, / To me did seem/ Apparell’d in celestial night/ The glory and the freshness of a dream.”

To escape from the tyranny of immediate interests and to find yourself in a free nature- this is one of the moral conditions of Thoreau’s ethical experience. He express this idea very gently, claiming: “Let everyone mind his own business, and endeavour to be what he was made. Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away. It is not important that he should mature as soon as an apple-tree or an oak.”<sup>25</sup>

Entering in a space of significations, away from the tiring cadence of the city, away from the aspirations of an urban society, man begins to care about the surroundings, to contemplate, to understand and to protect the unity of the natural order and its manifestations.

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<sup>24</sup> Fromm, Erich. 1966, *The Heart of Man. Its genius for good and evil* (New York), p. 41.

<sup>25</sup> Thoreau. David, Henry. *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, p. 242.

## 7. The importance of Walden for the field of environmental (virtue) ethics. Conclusions

Thoreau is, together with John Muir, Rachel Carson, Arne Naess, Aldo Leopold or Peter Singer, an important agent of the awareness movement of nature's role in our lives. Be it about sustainability, human flourishing or about the need of civic involvement in saving nature, these activists accentuate the need of rethinking the human-nature relationship on a moral base, taking into consideration the intrinsic value of natural elements (to extend the moral consideration to the nonhuman world). What is to live a good life in nature? What values can we extend from human to human relationship, to the field of environmental ethics? The intrusive attitude, materialistic, apathy, human chauvinism, the instrumentalist approach, anthropocentric attitude of domination can be countered by a moral reflection. The type of analysis that is specific to practical philosophy can be helpful in identifying the roots of these vices, with a positive impact on the construction of an ethical approach combining self-care, care for moral patients and responsibility for a firm personal moral body, one that is able to conduct and to correct environmental actions and policies.

What is truly valuable for Thoreau? Surely, health, integrity or flourishing of the biotic community, the absence of physical constraints, gratitude and love for natural environment, human excellence and flourishing in contact with nature. Nature is the space for emotional, sensorial, moral and social development, a space available for introspection. For a man with a spiritual conformation, the sacredness of the surroundings is a certainty, together with a sense of wonder, personal balance, harmony and stability. In Thoreau's view, living a good life means freedom of enjoying and understanding things without hurting others, health and awareness. There is a deep meaning in Thoreau's adventure: the one of self-achievement in solitude, the voluntary simplicity of living and being connected with the rhythms of nature, the pleasure of breathing the fresh air, the temperance of discovering yourself in a new environment, away from the urbanized existence, integrity seen as the capacity and courage of thinking on your own, which leads to an uncluttered mind on a daily basis. A limited and responsible use of external goods is an opportunity to focus on the valuable aspects of his life.

As Thoreau claims,

"Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. ... To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Thoreau. David, Henry. "*Walden, or Life in the Woods*", p. 14.

The non-anthropocentric approach is an ethical need and an intellectual task, which requires a proper intellectual framework: respect for non-human world, cultivating gratitude and a continuous effort for preserving life in all its manifestations. There is a power in Thoreau's experience: the power of detachment from worldly concerns to embrace a diverse life filled with challenge, novelty and multiple changes. This is a mature understanding of life, with a deep spiritual and emotional intimacy, with the purpose of being interested in everything. Thoreau's ethical experience is a mixture of bravery, fairness, vitality, beauty and respect. For the field of environmental virtue ethics, this is a reliable structure for what is to have a flourishing life, eudaimonia.

This lifestyle is helpful in designing a moral profile of a self-reliant agent, with the sense of belonging to a dynamic world. Apart from principles and norms, the value of Thoreau's experience is given by the lucid decision of living a solid life project, the configuration of methods and actions that support the life project, and the testing of values in different contexts, with an honest and sincere approximation of their epistemic validity.

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