

Amaena Guéniot

TERRE BRISÉE

Pour une philosophie de l'environnement



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DOUBLE PONCTUATION

Terre brisée

(Broken Earth)

For a
Philosophy of
the
Environment

Today we are confronted with a situation unprecedented in the history of humanity. For the first time - at this level of intensity and with this speed - our environment is being permanently and radically disrupted. It is becoming, more than ever, unstable and unpredictable, while it conditions our very existence. The imminence of this danger, the insecurity it implies and the weight of our responsibility weigh on our societies and on individuals.

Faced with the environmental catastrophe, Amaena Guéniot believes that it is essential to anchor our thinking in the philosophical tradition. In a very clear and accessible way, she shows us how Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Kant or Weil and Arendt can help us think about this unprecedented historical challenge. The stakes are high, for we must completely revise the conditions and purposes of human activity in this new context - that of a broken Earth that we must rebuild.

Table of contents and main points

PART 1 - DESCRIPTIVE PERSPECTIVE

The human as an event in the prehuman genesis of the environment

Editor's note: The main points proposed below for each chapter do not capture the full subtlety of the author's argument. They are intended only to encourage reference to the full text.

Chapter 1 - Prehuman structuring of our environment

Main points - Situating humans in a pre-human environment allows us to measure the extent of the environmental catastrophe. The environmental structures characteristic of the Holocene have been disrupted: will the environment continue to present structures and forms adjusted to our needs? Will we be able to adapt to its new form and to the unpredictability that characterizes the end of a geological epoch? This is not certain, as long as we do not forget that humanity is contingent in the history of the environment. It is thus only abusively that the human being can consider himself as the end (*télos*) of the environment and reduce the other living beings and the environmental resources to the state of exploitable means without limits, provoking a destruction of the environment as well as of its capacities to regulate itself and to offer a propitious framework to the deployment of a sustainable and common world, woven of the human works (cultural, scientific...). However, we must not consider that humans are powerless and irresponsible. It is for this reason that it is essential to understand how the environmental catastrophe constitutes a human event in the genesis of environmental structures.

Chapter 2 - The environmental disaster, an event

Main points - The objective of this chapter is to show how the environmental catastrophe constitutes an event capable of upsetting the structures of the environment. The disaster environmental, triply characterized by a phenomenon of exceeding the limits of the environment, by an irreversible increase of entropy and by the globalization of its effects, has three major impacts. Concerning the atmosphere, the major problem is that of climate change. Concerning

PART 2 - JUDICIAL PERSPECTIVE

Humans, responsible
for the environmental
disaster

the biosphere, we are facing the sixth extinction of biodiversity. Concerning the lithosphere and the hydrosphere, we face two simultaneous problems: the scarcity of available resources on the one hand, and the abundance of other resources whose use reinforces the environmental catastrophe. As we have seen, the manifestations of the environmental catastrophe feed on each other. Overexploitation of resources and the resulting climate change are accelerating the extinction of biodiversity and thus diminishing the capacity of biodiversity to regulate lithospheric, atmospheric and hydrospheric pollution. We are now confronted with the loss of the environment that has accompanied humanity for millennia, an environment that has a value in itself, and that has a use value for man, since it is, for example, what allowed the development of agriculture. Therefore, are we not confronted with a loss of the world?

Chapter 3 - The loss of the world

Main points - How is humanity confronted with the event that constitutes the environmental catastrophe and of which it is at the origin? The risk for humanity is probably not so much to disappear as to continue to live, having lost many possessions and loved ones, in a radically different environment. Even if it manages to avoid this, it will always be able to put an end to the environment it has inherited and shared. Humanity is now in the age of the end, doubly characterized by increasing uncertainty and by the tightening of deadlines. If it is imperative to act, by integrating that our time is that of the environmental catastrophe, it is thus to avoid sinking in an "acosmia". However, to be able to act, it is advisable to know the causal chains in which our action is intended to be inserted. In other words, we must be able to identify the causes of the environmental disaster.

Chapter 1 - Human representations, all too human

Main points - The concept of "Anthropocene" seems to induce a presupposition: the human, the *anthropos*, would be by nature responsible for the environmental catastrophe and victim of it. However, there are historical, geographical and social differences in human vulnerability and responsibility. To understand them, a detour through anthropology is necessary. Anthropology teaches us that the representations that people have of the environment condition certain practices, which can sometimes be harmful, sometimes beneficial. Thus, the utilitarian representation of the environment and of living beings as a "good" to be exploited and used is undoubtedly one of the factors of the environmental catastrophe. Conversely, representing the environment and living organisms as moral persons with rights and deserving of our respect makes it possible to recognize institutionally that the environment is worthwhile as an end in itself, and not only as a means to the use of man. The challenge is also to get rid of a teleological understanding of the world, according to which man would be the end, the goal of the living and of the world. At the same time, we cannot remain with

the question of representations: representations alone, without the technical and economic activities that they induce, have no impact on the environment.

Chapter 2 - Exploited, artificial and contaminated environment

Main points - Labor, work and action are the three dimensions of all human activity. Labor, always started again, is essential, because without it, our world and our beings would fall in ruin. It is what allows us to maintain our environment, to take care of it. However, work is not enough, because only labor, which produces durable goods, and action, which generates new perennial institutions, allow us to make the world, that is to say to create a sharing not only with the past and present generations but also with the generations to come. To accomplish his labor, his work and his action, man always relies on technique, which anthropologically defines humanity. However, the use of technology can be poisonous in two ways. It becomes so when it implies accelerating labor, to the point of making it impossible, and extending it (the fruits of work and action then become as little perennial as those of work). This is what we have called the excessiveness of *homo laborans*. It also becomes so when humans claim to create their environment as if it were a work of art, whether by extraterrestrial conquest or by the total artificialization of the environment. This is what makes the excessiveness of *homo faber*. This double excess is itself based on a double illusion: the illusion according to which the human being could subject the environment to his rhythm, and the illusion according to which the environment, condition of any human activity, could be a human work. However, it would be a mistake to think that technology alone is responsible for this excess: technology, even if its development follows its own logic, is embedded in the economic and political sphere. It is within the framework of a given economic-political system that technology has become a poison, and it is within another economic-political system that it can become a remedy. It would therefore be pointless, to take just one example, to ask farmers to change their agricultural techniques without also transforming the social, political and economic organization that sometimes forces them into situations of precariousness and misery or into working conditions that are unsatisfactory, both for them and for the environment, even though they aspire, like every human being, to do their work well and thereby contribute to the common world.

Chapter 3 - Material *hubris*, energy *hubris*

Main points - Technology is not harmful as such for the environment. It is when it is subordinated to a capitalist logic, a logic that is both political and economic and that aims at increasing capital by monopolizing land, money and work. The capitalist privatization of the environment, in many of its dimensions, allows its unbridled exploitation. Because exploitation leads to an extinction of the productive force of the environment, it is correlated with

PART 3 - NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The human being,
responsible for the
care of the
environment

expansionism: it is necessary to conquer ever new resources, which implies ever new pollution. We know that this capitalist logic is leading us to our ruin, even if it can be partly amended (which is already interesting). However, we are struck by the inertia of the economic and political leaders. Can we blame them for "environmental suicide"? Should we rather think that they are struck by irrationality? Our hypothesis is that there is indeed a capitalist rationality, that of governance by numbers. When this is imposed on the environment, it has deleterious effects. This is why it is necessary to replace governance by numbers with government by the law of the environment.

Chapter 1 - Social Autonomy

Main points - We have entered the age of limits: there are physical boundaries and thresholds that we cannot exceed. At the same time, the presence of such constraints is not incompatible with the voluntary establishment of limits, through the mediation of law. In other words, the fact that we are constrained by the environment does not mean that the end of history has come, and that there are therefore no more alternatives, that there is no more possibility of autonomy for individual and collective subjects. Thus, the fact that we are obliged to reduce our consumption of resources and pollution does not oblige us to a generalized degrowth. According to a principle of justice, we can penalize all the excesses of consumption and pollution, while guaranteeing to all the subjects the access to a basic consumption. In this perspective, progress remains possible, even if it does not have the same face as before. However, to institute a social autonomy for all, which guarantees to each one the access to the healthiest possible environment and to its resources, supposes beforehand to have acquired a political autonomy.

Chapter 2 - Political Autonomy

Main points - There is no point in wanting to promote social autonomy if the political autonomy that allows us to institute rules of access to the environment is not first conquered. Faced with the urgency of the environmental catastrophe, it is fundamental to think of new democratic institutions, by inspiring us of what already exists, that it is on the theoretical level or on the practical level (citizens' assemblies, power of revocation of the elected representatives...). The underlying idea is that an individual or oligarchic power, confined to its ivory tower, is blind to the changes that are necessary or powerless to achieve them. The expression of contradictions and the overcoming of individual interests is necessary, and this is what democratic power sharing aims at. Democratic institutions for the environment can be built around three axes: the legal axis, the institutional axis and the representation axis. To be beneficial, such institutions must be understood within a sovereign framework, one in which the democratic will is respected, not one in which political and democratic power is subordinated to other rules without being expected to derogate from them, such as the economic rules of free

trade. The question of political autonomy thus raises an economic question, that of productive autonomy.

Chapter 3 - Productive Autonomy

Main points - To face the environmental catastrophe, it is necessary to change the production paradigm. In this respect, the experiments carried out by communities, in the North as well as in the South, are interesting, because they show us that other modes of production are possible. However, they are not enough, on their own, to change the whole production system. Yet, our responsibility is first to put an end to the most polluting productions (such as the fossil fuel industry). We cannot therefore be satisfied with supporting other productions alongside the large polluting industries, whose functioning threatens the other productions (air, water, soil pollution...). The logic of the commons can then serve as a compass: on the one hand, it is a question of reforming the private sector of production, so that economic decisions are not reserved for managers and shareholders, but are subordinated to political decisions, notably in environmental matters, taken by workers, consumers and above all by citizens. On the other hand, it is a question of making effective citizen control over political decisions, especially decisions concerning the development and planning of production, which are fundamental for thinking about a more harmonious deployment of human activities in the era of environmental catastrophe.

Amaena Guéniot

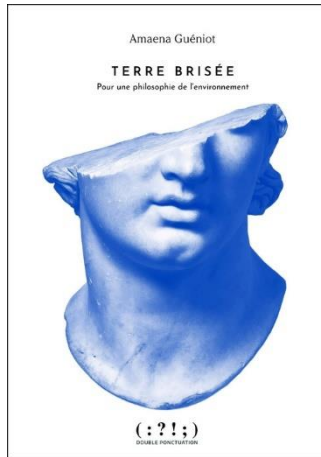
Amaena Guéniot is an alumnus of the École normale supérieure of Paris and an associate professor of philosophy. Since 2018, she teaches Environmental Philosophy at the University of Paris Nanterre.

In *Terre brisée (Broken Earth)*, she proposes an original approach to environmental problems - because the answers to environmental challenges cannot be only technical, they must also be thought, in particular through philosophy.

A philosopher of the new generation, Amaena Guéniot has written an accessible and convincing essay.



The book



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