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Interview

Roberto Marchesini. **Etologia del desiderio. Riscoprire la propria animalità.** Torino: Edizioni Lindau, 2023.

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*This interview addressed to Professor Roberto Marchesini concerns one of his main spheres of reflection: the concept of desire. Contrary to the classical humanist tradition, in fact, Marchesini develops a conception of desire as internal redundancy, a vital force, that is in constellation with the concept of Spinoza's conatus. In this meeting we explored what he expressed in his book *Ethology of Desire*. Rediscover your own animality.*

1. Traditionally, desire has often been perceived as arising from a sense of lack – I am thinking for example of Plato's analogy of the pierced amphora, which suggests a void or gap to be filled. Instead, the interpretation you present regarding the concept of desire is notably different.

I think the mistake lies in conflating what drives us to desire, the affective impulse that makes us desire beings, with the formulation of desires or desiderata—namely, what objects or outcomes we direct our desires toward. The problem, from my perspective, revolves around the interpretation of the underlying motivation for our desires. We desire because we are continually projecting ourselves into the world, driven by our exuberance and non-deficiency, propelling us beyond our current state. When we desire something, it is because we are brimming with actions to undertake. Objects merely serve as the necessary targets for our overflowing desire for action, for a predicative flow seeking an outlet. The yearning we experience attests to our vitality rather than indicating a sense of lack. Indeed, if we think about it, all our desires stem from the wish to engage in certain activities, such as competing, collaborating, collecting, imitating, or caring for others, to name just a few examples.

The explanation rooted in deficiency has its own philosophical and anthropological tradition, aiming to understand human actions as compensatory responses. This perspective forms the basis of anthropocentrism, which posits an ontological distinction between humans and other species. According to this view, only humans desire as a result of lack, while other species express their drives in a purely instinctual manner. However, this stance misunderstands the nature of desiring affectivity, which is inherent to all forms of animality, including human beings. This affectivity is not a blind drive but rather a creative expression of this inherent projection, enriching experience and therefore individuality. Desiring always yields singular consequences.

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2. You use the ethological horizon to piece together a philosophy of desire that can offer a different perspective on the human condition. Would you care to explain it?

To illustrate the animal's interest in something and the formation of goals or expectations in animals, I will use a straightforward example: a cat chasing a ball in a predatory play scenario. When I place the ball directly in front of the cat, it uses its paw to strike the ball, setting it in motion, and then proceeds to chase it. It is evident that the cat doesn't desire the ball itself; rather, it desires the act of chasing. The same happens when a dog initiates a game with us, seemingly fixated on a toy like a braid. However, the dog's true desire lies in the competition and engagement rather than the toy. Likewise, when we observe a child collecting seashells on the beach, it may appear that the child desires the shells. Still, the fact that, upon returning to the beach umbrella, they often forget or discard them en masse reveals that their true desire was the act of collecting. This perspective diverges significantly from the traditional viewpoint and aligns more closely with the ethological tradition in the wake of Konrad Lorenz, which emphasises motivation as the genuine driving force behind behaviour.

On the other hand, we know that our behaviour is governed by two main factors: 1) feelings, which are expressions of emotions and are responsible for how we feel about what is happening; 2) passions, which encompass all those tendencies that drive us to carry out actions aimed at achieving a particular outcome, with motivations as their source. To better understand motivations, I use a very simple metaphor: that of "what-does," in other words, the verbal predicate. For example, "What does a cat do? It chases. What does a human being do? It collects."

Desire, therefore, has an inherently verbal foundation, which means it is rooted in action. It is evident that desire implies a target, but the ball for the cat and the shells for the child are products of their desires to chase and collect, respectively. So, desiring doesn't arise from a lack but from an expressive exuberance that engages with the world to construct its targets and contextual connotations. This exuberance of desiring, the desire to perform actions, makes desires possible. These desires result from circumstances, such as being on the seashore, or from our imagination. However, because the verbal predicate doesn't define the circumstantial aspects of action – what, where, how, when I desire – but rather implies them, prompting the subject to construct them through experience, desiring is inherently free.

3. Western culture has mostly viewed desire as a constraint on the realisation of human rationality. Desires were seen as cravings that hindered individuals from engaging in conscious action wisely guided by reason.

There are also philosophers who have emphasised the role of affectivity in thought construction, considering emotions and reason as complementary components of reasoning, rather than opposed ones. For instance, Spinoza viewed affections as complementary to reason, and Giordano Bruno, in *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, spoke of knowledge as the result of two dogs, where the "greyhounds" represents reason and the "mastiff" symbolises passions. Similarly, Nietzsche agrees with Spinoza on the importance of affections, but unlike him believes that they should not be tempered but rather liberated in the will to power. In addition, the field of neurobiology, thanks to authors like Antonio Damasio's *Descartes' Error* and Jaak Panksepp's *The Archaeology of Mind. Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotions*, has long re-



evaluated the role of emotions and motivations as inducers of thought. Jean Piaget shared a similar perspective, regarding affectivity as the driving force behind reasoning and learning processes. This is in line with ethology, which, departing from the behaviourist emphasis on external stimuli as behavioural triggers, highlights the role of endogenous induction, as seen in Lorenz's psycho-hydraulic model. Still, desiring affectivity, while rooted in innate drives, is not deterministic or purely instinctual; rather, it serves as a link connecting beings to the world and facilitating their experiences.

4. In this age of compulsive consumerism in which fulfillment seems to never come and dissatisfaction reigns supreme, not only among us adults but especially among the young, what does a new interpretation of desire mean, and what value does it have?

Understanding desire as a deficiency means condemning oneself to eternal dissatisfaction: desire arises from exuberance, that is, from the desire to perform actions, true fulfillment can only come from activity. The result – the object of desire – can only ever offer momentary gratification. To illustrate the distinction between gratification and fulfillment, consider this example: gratification is akin to indulging in a piece of chocolate, while fulfillment is more like savouring a delicious plate of pasta. The former provides a fleeting pleasure without truly satisfying one's longing, whereas the latter brings about a sense of inner peace. We now understand that crucial neuromodulators such as endorphins and serotonin play a role in fulfillment, which alleviates restlessness and unease. In other words, we should abandon the notion that material possessions and achievements can grant us the enduring serenity we fruitlessly pursue. Equally mistaken is the belief that happiness derives from the absence of emotions or passions. Desire is inherently linked to action, and it is through activity that we can find genuine satisfaction. It is clear that each species has its unique motivations, as we have seen with the difference between the cat's interest in chasing and the human's inclination to collect. Giacomo Leopardi referred to these inclinations as "vagueries" and emphasised how they are inherent to one's nature. Thus, solitude might be a welcomed state for "The Lonely Sparrow" ("Il Passero solitario") but a source of suffering and regret for the poet.

5. Do you believe that a re-interpretation of desire according to the perspective you offer can guide us toward a different future? Can it lead us to a world that goes beyond consumerism and capitalism, suggesting alternative logics for development and life, even from the economic and political standpoint?

I am strongly convinced of this. The conventional view of desire as a sense of lack has led to a skewed outlook on life, fostering constant dissatisfaction, which has permeated the fabric of our societies. When we perceive desire as lack, we tend to find satisfaction in acquisition. In contrast, if we interpret it as exuberance, a yearning for action, we are more inclined to seek satisfaction in engagement. These two perspectives are fundamentally opposed. The pursuit of acquisition often leads to consumerism, individualism, and at times, narcissism. Instead, recognizing desire as exuberance encourages us to devote ourselves to activities, making our lives centred on purposeful actions rather than consumption.

In essence, we come to understand that true happiness is not found in a hedonistic or narcissistic interpretation of life but in the act of giving—dedicating our lives to meaningful actions. I believe that this awareness is more crucial today than ever before. The ecological

crisis is not solely a matter of how we sustain our livelihoods but is also rooted in the idea that our happiness is linked to possessing and consuming the world. This issue extends to individuals, who can become trapped in cycles of psychological bulimia, and to humanity at large: we are gradually realising that humans, contrary to Heidegger's view, are not merely builders but also destroyers of worlds.

6. It is clear, based on your perspective, that the view of desire you present – one that characterises it as a creative and fulfilling force propelling us towards the world, as an invitation to engage in dialogue with our surroundings – is far more constructive than the one that has shaped our understanding thus far. This shift naturally prompts us to reevaluate many aspects of our human condition. In your opinion, which aspects should be questioned in particular?

It is about overcoming the notion that one can discover the meaning of life within one's self, in an act of existential solipsism. The pursuit of meaning inherently extends beyond one's individual existence. Consequently, seeking meaning while remaining isolated within the boundaries of one's own life is fundamentally illogical. Transcendence can be understood and interpreted in various ways, and the perspective I propose begins with a reevaluation of desire. Desire is intricately linked to the attribution of meaning, but not in the contemporary hedonistic sense, which often emphasises pleasure and the accumulation of diverse experiences. When desire is seen as the potentiality of action, the actuality of dedication and self-giving becomes pivotal in understanding what truly leads to happiness.

I came to this realisation when I understood that my life's purpose was to dedicate myself to an activity that served others and humanity as a whole: achieving harmony with the interconnected web of living beings and overcoming anthropocentric claims to ownership over the world. I believe this insight is embedded in the wisdom of all great philosophical and spiritual traditions, albeit expressed in distinct forms.

7. In what way does this approach to desire fit in with a posthumanist view? And how does it differ from the anthropocentric paradigm?

I think that the core of the post-humanist critique against the tradition that has predominantly characterised the modern age revolves around two primary aspects. First, the rejection of solipsistic human ontology: posthumanism questions the autarkic idea of a humanity who relies solely on itself, emphasising that even within a relational ontology, human existence extends beyond the inter-personal sphere. Second, posthumanism redefines human nature. Rather than viewing it as a state of inherent incompleteness to be compensated for, post-humanism posits human nature as inherently inclined toward hybridity and ontological openness to unexplored existential dimensions.

Both of these positions drive the development of an eco-ontology, which can be understood as a relational ontology that dismantles the perception of human impermeability and autarchy. Instead, it promotes the idea of humans participating in a shared existence with the entire community of living beings. The interpretation of desire is foundational to our understanding of ecological issues: anthropocentric solipsism has led us to perceive the world as a mere reservoir of resources at humanity's disposal. At the same time, this model reflects on individuals, who all consider themselves the centre of the world, re-proposing the same



ravenous logic of appropriation and exploitation of what surrounds them, in the illusion of finding a sense of meaning or satisfaction that instead gets further and further away.

I think that posthumanism is a drastic change in the values called upon to guide our conduct, in the realisation that there is no opposition between happiness or achieving meaning in one's life and an alliance with the planet. Today, we are still immersed in the logic of desire as appropriation - typical of modernity - which is why we experience eco-friendly orientations as renunciations or undue limitations to our fulfillment. But this is simply a mistaken point of view, because happiness and meaning do not lie in robbery and selfishness, but in self-giving. I believe, however, that value change alone is not enough. We need a new sentimental education that binds us to life.