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# Omar F. Giraldo & Ingrid F. Toro, 'Environmental Affectivity: Aesthetics of Inhabiting'

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See table of contents

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**Omar F. Giraldo & Ingrid F. Toro**. *Environmental Affectivity: Aesthetics of Inhabiting*. Bloomsbury 2024. 176 pp. $167.95 USD (Hardcover 9781350345102); $58.50 USD (Paperback 9781350345140).

Emotions are everywhere. More precisely, affects, as the external expression of internal states associated with sensations and feelings, have become the subject of many recent studies and reflections about the human condition, neuroscience, society, culture and aesthetics. This book is part of this trend that proposes the rediscovering of the affective as an inherent part of our lives, our ways of knowing and relating to the world. It is also a critique of the Cartesian dominance in philosophy and human sciences, the dualistic perspective that divides mind from body, and gives supremacy to a "spiritual" (some kind of immaterial element) cogito (rational) as the way of apprehending the world. Authors Giraldo and Toro aim to overcome such a dualistic view in the formulation of an environmental ethic. They want to reconcile the guiding principles of a holistic relation with the world (i.e. Nature) with the aesthetic appreciation of interacting bodies (humans, non-humans, animated, not animated).

Spinoza is the starting point of their quest. As in other cases, such as Bugallo's *Filosofía ambiental y ecosofías* (Prometeo Editorial, 2015), the authors have found inspiration in the Sephardic-Dutch philosopher to approach the question of Nature. Based on different readings and interpretations of Spinoza's materialism (e.g. Maya, Deleuze, and others), they postulate the primacy of the body as the locus from where one derives any knowledge or understanding of the world constituted by bodies. They follow Spinoza's dictum in his Ethics that body and spirit (mind) are manifestations (or expressions) of the same and only substance (God in the theological language of Spinoza); one as extension, the other as thought. The unity of everything (of such bodies and minds) is the foundation of the aesthetics experience and the ethical relations. Without stating it openly, Giraldo and Toro propose a new pantheism, and, in some way, a new animism, as we are going to see later in this review.

The interaction with the totality, according to them, is firstly a sensitive one. It's through our senses, and the senses of the rest of the bodies, that we enter in contact with the world. There is no way we can escape from this sensorial entanglement since we are part of a living totality. The authors make an equivalency between sensing and affectivity, since one always leads to the other. In the book, *Feeling & Knowing: Making Minds Conscious* (Pantheon Books, 2021), Antonio Damasio argues that feeling, emotions and affective responses are part of a system of relationships

associated with our sensations, perceptions, thoughts and desires. The aesthetic is therefore derived from our affective responses to the beautiful and pleasant, but also (as the authors recognize in the book), from the ugly and disruptive. It is then from the aesthetics evaluation (as sensitive and affective interaction) that they propose their environmental ethics. Their ethics pretend not to be anthropocentric, nor idealistic, nor prescriptive, but pragmatic. However, do they achieve it?

First, let's confront this non-anthropocentric ethic that looks to de-centering the human in Nature. The problem is that we, humans, do not have any other way to relate to the world that does not go through our human senses. I agree with Giraldo and Toro that we need a good dose of humility to put aside any ambition of mastering/controlling Nature (environmental catastrophes remind us constantly of our fragility). Nevertheless, we cannot renounce to our human condition of bodies and minds that feel, judge, and think, but mostly try to persevere (the conatus of Spinoza) as is the case of other living creatures. Therefore, I do not see how an environmental ethic could totally be disconnected to some form of anthropocentrism.

Second, the materialism (not idealistic) of such perspective pretends that there is a fundamental equality among all the bodies (animated and not animated) that entails a new form of animism. The inhabitants of Nature can "talk" with the language of their bodies. The problem, according to the authors, is that humans have lost their ability to understand the language of Nature. They blame capitalism for such alienation, for the lack of environmental empathy. Greed and the quest for comfort have corrupted the '*bon sauvage*' in the Rousseauean sense. Behind its materialistic veil, I perceive that the ethic formulated by Giraldo and Toro returns to some form of idealistic conceptualization of Nature and the vernacular (or previous) forms of existence.

Third, the authors insist that they do not want to be prescriptive, that there is no "ought" in their ethics. Their pragmatic goal is to sustain life and living (animated and not animated). And they see this happening following two paths: a change in what they call the "regime of affectivity" (98) to regain our empathetic knowledge and aesthetic appreciation of the totality of Nature; and a preparation for the "collapse" (90)—a word the authors use in a very loose way — implying the big disruption of capitalistic civilization. Giraldo and Toro's realism is based on the idea that continuous historical cycles of growth and decay will eventually lead to the end of our hegemonic forms of production, consumption and disposal of waste. Their apocalyptic projection is not far from other religious visions of the end of the world.

Now, let us explore their declared ambition to avoid any moral judgment or obligations.

Giraldo and Toro claim that they propose an ethic of renunciation, changing the direction of our desires from the 'wanting more' of capitalism to the 'will' for life (somewhat Nietzschean, even if not explicitly said). The question is how we arrive there. How do we persuade people to do so? Imposing them a more 'natural' way of living? Or waiting for the apocalyptic collapse to reinitiate a new form of living, a kind of Biblical flood approach? These questions are not answered in the book, even if we know some of them from recent history, since all apocalyptic-inspired politics have ended in violent totalitarianism (e.g. Pol Pot or the Chinese cultural revolution).

Two additional criticisms are necessary. The new pantheism of their proposal is quite evident even if the authors try to avoid any accusation of monism or 'holism.' The book has a spiritual tone. The un-prescriptive intention of the authors is tinted by their many references to traditions, such as Buddhism, Taoism and Indigenous beliefs that recognize the of sacredness of life. The implicit hierarchy of the totality is the source of their many prescriptions that pretend to move away from the obligations that they associate with the Judeo-Christian heritage. The book is filled with the use of 'must' and 'need,' contradicting their purely pragmatic/productive ethics pretensions.

Finally, Giraldo and Toro consider too quickly the modern urban condition as just a recent development in human history, affirming that the Earth is still 'mostly peasant', though I am not sure this is true. They ignore in their analysis the role of technology, and particularly communication technologies, in shaping our sensibilities and illusions about nature, the environment and the non-human animals. Their ethics, attached to the vernacular (or an idealized past), did not consider the hyper-connected and virtual relations that millions of people have with Nature. This requires more than generalizations about capitalism and the alienation of urban humans. Maybe in a future book, they will further develop how affectivity is being changed in the world of big data and never-ending consumption of images.

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