



Comune di Parma



EU Regional Development Funds - Interreg Central Europe AWAIR
Strategies and operational tools to support adaptation actions
in vulnerable population groups during the Severe Air Pollution Episodes (SAPes)
Parma - APE Parma Museo, via Farini 32a, November 6th, 2019

From the air, life: short considerations at the origins of Western thought

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**I thank you all
for organizing this very stimulating meeting**

I apologize for not being with you.

I live in Modena in the Po valley, one of the European regions where air quality is worse, and I am forced to breathe lots of fine dust and exhaust gases.

For this reason, I feel the need to move often to Roccapelago, where I come from, a medieval village in the woods of the Modena Apennines from which I speak to you.

Today I propose a brief philosophical journey in the ancient Mediterranean, between Greek thought and biblical anthropology, to go to the most remote and authentic roots of our reflection on air.

Anaximenes: in the beginning was the air

We are in the sixth century before the Christian era. According to the philosopher Anaximenes of the ancient school of Miletus - the first philosophical school born in the Greek-speaking Mediterranean - the universe is a reality constantly in the making.

Its movement is restless and recalls the breath of man (Diels, Kranz, B 1-2): first it contracts and condenses, producing material things, then it expands and becomes rarefied, producing immaterial things.

Air has no borders. Air adapts to every shape. Air is invisible and envelops everything (just like the "indefinite" - *to ápeiron*, of which his master Anaximander had spoken).

Anaximenes: in the beginning was the air

Air has in it the character of the divine: a divine always on the move and never satiated. Everything that exists is made of air (Diels, Kranz, A 8-10), a beautiful image to say that reality is in continuous evolution and that all earthly forms are within a process of eternal transformation. Life is air and air is life.

"It seems that the world is breathing" (Russell, 47). Air is what gives life, unity, order and harmony to the cosmos, which otherwise would be only a heap of broken fragments.

That everything comes from air and is dissolved to it means that every part of the universe is related to all the others.

Anaximenes: in the beginning was the air

The cosmos is a single great living organism. Even the man, that by breathing is made of air, is part - and not the dominator - of the whole cosmos. Whoever destroys a part of it inevitably damages the entire cosmos.

Anaximenes did not know about PM10 and PM2.5. He knew nothing about the ozone hole. He stated, however, that the warming of the air produces an alteration of reality, in the form of an expansion and a loosening of the matter. And when - as we experience today - rapid warming of the air is followed by a sudden cooling, then catastrophes that bury humanity occur (Diels, Kranz, A 7).

Anaximenes: in the beginning was the air

In the days of Anaximenes the philosophical thought did not hate *techne*, that was not considered the main culprit of humanity's troubles, contrarily to the modern philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. At the time of Anaximenes one could be both philosopher and scientist, supported by the idea that thought always comes from the empirical observation of reality.

To the philosopher-scientist Anaximenes the world did not appear only as a gaseous reality, which assumes changing forms. To him the world was an immense body permeated with air and, therefore, a living body. Removing the air means taking life away. Twenty-five centuries have passed, but we still have a lot in common with this distant ancestor of ours.

Yahwist: the breath of God in man

Yahwist is not a person, but a current of theological thought, which re-elaborates ancient monotheistic religious traditions of a Palestinian tribe, known as "the Jews". This is what some German scholars have called it in the 18th century when they began to study the Hebrew Bible as a text of religious literature and not as a divine revelation.

Yahwist sees God not as a superior being who stands by himself, far from men, but as a relational being who loves life and seeks the company of men (Westermann, 31).

Yahwist: the breath of God in man

In *Genesis*, the first book of the Hebrew Bible, Yahwist tells what it means for human beings to feel like creatures of God. To do this, Yahwist uses a word that means air: *nefesh*, breath of life (Gen 2,7). But before being filled with the air blown into him by the Creator, man is earth. His name is *Adàm* and comes from *Adamà*, earth (just as in Latin *homo* comes from *humus*).

And like every part of earth man is fragile: he always needs care and protection (Westermann, 32). When he receives the breath of life from God, man ceases to be only earth and becomes a living breath. This means that man constantly needs air to live, just as he needs food and water.

Man always faces the real danger of losing his freedom and his life. Blowing into man the vital breath, God reaches out to man, comes to his aid, takes his defense.

Yahwist: the breath of God in man

And so the breath of life kindles desire: it makes every human being stretch his neck towards his fellow men and towards everything that is beautiful, pleasant and tasty in the world. Desire is like air: it is the breath of our life! But - as we know - it is typical of desire never to find satisfaction and never to stop, just as the breath is not capable of prolonged apnea (Wolff, 18-27).

The air that fills our lungs and the unstoppable breath are the metaphor of our vital feelings: the desire for happiness, the constant reaching out to the origin of our existence, the compassion towards those in misfortune. At each inhalation we remember that life is a gift. At each exhalation we take responsibility for others and for the world. Before God.

Greek cosmocentrism and biblical anthropocentrism

Anaximenes's thought puts in front of us the unavailability of air: no one can interfere with the origin of the world. There is something sacred in the air: man does not have the power to ruin it, because his jurisdiction over the world is somewhat limited.

Jahwist asks us the question: what is the place of man in the universe? and leaves us the freedom to give even contradictory answers. The place of man in the cosmos is in the peripheries of galaxies, because man is a fragile and incomplete being.

Although a fragile creature, man has his place at the center of the world, not because he has conquered the seat of power and the scepter of dominion over the world. Man is at the center because his breath makes him a bridge placed between all the living and the Living one par excellence.

In conclusion

Everything is interconnected. Air is the metaphor of this deep bond of interdependence, which connects men to life. Guarding life to be guarded by it.

Greek philosophy and biblical anthropology follow different paths, but they converge in recognizing that the limit of man is also his strength.

**We are obliged to breathe, but each breath
takes us beyond all obligation
and introduces us into the great gift of life.**



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Thank you for your attention

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