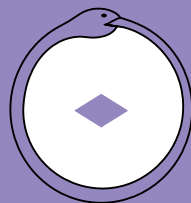
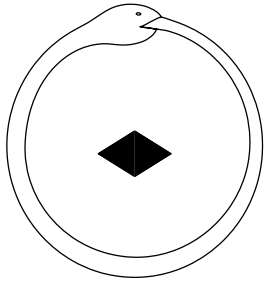


THE CATERPILLAR  
AND THE BUTTERFLY  
Emanuele Coccia



notebooks  
SELVAGEM



## THE CATERPILLAR AND THE BUTTERFLY

Emanuele Coccia

Video-interview conducted at Orto Botanico di Roma by journalist Damiano Fedeli, on August 2, 2020, for the pre-launch of *Metamorfoses* [Metamorphoses]. Transcription and translation from Italian to Portuguese by Irma Caputo.

### METAMORPHOSES

The essay that came out in France (on the same day as the lockdown) and is now coming out in Brazil starts from a very trivial finding, which is the enchantment that each of us has experienced facing the caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly.

And this phenomenon seemed interesting to me because it is a matter of two bodies, the caterpillar and the butterfly, which do not share anything, either from an anatomical, ecological, or ethnological point of view.

In the background, the caterpillar and the butterfly have two completely different silhouettes. They have two completely distinct ways of life.

The caterpillar is a bunch of digestive tubes resting on the legs of an insect; the butterfly, on the other hand, is a sex machine. The first understands nature as a gigantic McDonald's where everything you want to eat is available. The second, in turn, considers nature as an enormous satirical and erotic space. So, these are two completely different *ethes*, in addition to being two completely different worlds.

The caterpillar inhabits a terrestrial world, while the butterfly inhabits an aerial world. Despite this moral, cosmological or ecological, and even anatomical difference, it concerns the same being and that is already interesting because it means that a life form can never be reestablished to an anatomical or moral identity. We are used to thinking that the being is something that we can shape in one life form, one ethos, one character, while the caterpillar and the

butterfly show us this is not exactly how it works. Also from the point of view of ethos, life easily passes from one form to another, never returning to the same world – deep down, in the metamorphosis process of insects, one passes from one world to another, and life is what allows the merging of these two worlds.

The book's thesis is that this same relationship that joins a being through two bodies, two lifeforms, two distinct worlds is the relationship that exists between all individuals of a species, all species between them, and all species of the land where we live.

In what sense? The idea is that there is an absolute continuity between all individuals belonging to the same species. And the proof of this is the metamorphosis that each of us went through at birth. To be born means to allot a body, or two bodies that have already lived, that is, our mother's body and the flesh of our mother and father, and subject it to a second time, making it live again. Each of us is nothing less than an enormous genetic and anatomical recycling.

Our body has already lived and it is much older than our own age.

Our flesh is at least as old as our mother was when we were conceived, but as our mother was also the flesh from a body that had already lived...

There seems to be a continuity among living beings belonging to the same species, through birth. There is this same relationship between all species, which Darwin showed to us through the theory of evolution. The theory of evolution tells us that all species are connected by a metamorphic relation, each species is the metamorphosis of a preceding one.

#### A BRICOLAGE OF ALL LIFE FORMS

In this essay, as in the previous one, the strategy was to take almost literally what Darwin, Biology, or Science says and carry it out to its ultimate consequences.

The hypothesis is that contemporary science often presupposes visions or cosmologies that are much more surrealistic or imaginative, imaginary, and *imaginificent* when compared to the Amazonian cosmologies or the cosmologies implicit in the world's great religions.

The idea is to take to the letter what science proposes and to capture its metaphysical status. For example, in the theory of evolution, the idea was: if each species is a metamorphosis of a previous species, that means that each species is a vast patchwork of forms and species that preceded it and that will come after it.

This becomes pretty evident in our DNA because we know our DNA is a bricolage of many pieces that come from all forms of life that had to be crossed and built before becoming human, and many times also from lateral forms because through lateral gene transfer, there are pieces that got in thanks to the viruses and so on...

This becomes clear every time we look in the mirror, for example. There is nothing uniquely human in the fact that we have eyes, we have a nose or ears.

We share all these traits with thousands of other species.

It means that our body gives us access to a life that is only partly human, which already configures itself as multispecific. We are a kind of walking zoo. We ourselves are already biodiversity.

Before we relate to a pear or apple tree, a dog or a cat, we already are a set of forms that lived before. Because that's what genetics is, metamorphosis.

That's what the evolution of the species is. It means that almost everything we have inside us has already been experienced thousands of times and it now lives a second, third, fourth, thousandth life and it is open to future transformations.

## **BIRTH AND DEATH**

There is resistance to the idea that every life we carry with us is a life with a beginning before our body's birth and an end long after that body dies. Such resistances are often not linked to questions of a scientific nature but of a religious nature and sometimes, more simply, of a social nature.

Earlier I was talking about birth, which, from a biological point of view, is evidence that the life that animates our body began long before the moment our body started to live. We are flesh that has already lived,

we are a genetic code that has shaped other lives, and the resistance that persists in face of this evidence is linked more to the fact that our culture has focused much more on death than on birth.

If we compare the amount of films or works, also of a scientific nature, and novels dedicated to death with those dedicated to birth, there is no comparison and this is, evidently, linked to the fact that we are a culture made by males to males, and it has neglected that peculiar phenomenon that is giving life to other bodies.

#### TO BE FOOD

Regarding the question of nurturing a life that is another life and that will go on living regardless of the end of our body – after the death of our body – there is a story from an Australian naturalist and ecologist, Val Plumwood, that was attacked by an alligator during a Kayak trip on a river, in Australia, and instead of reacting ordinarily as any of us would, that is, simply becoming terrified by death, in face of the possibility of becoming food for animals, she had the reflexion to tell herself “What I am living is surreal, it isn’t absolutely possible, this alligator is breaking the rules of nature, because it is impossible that a man could become food for the animals”. Val Plumwood interpreted this reaction as a metaphysical resistance to the idea that our life could be transformed into the life of somebody else. Because to be eaten by somebody means that life itself can generate either a human species or the species of an alligator, and there is still a metaphysical and religious resistance that prevails to that, more than a social and cultural one.

#### SENSITISATION AND TRANSFORMATION

I am optimistic in the sense that this awareness of belonging to a wider life or being crossed by a life that started and will end somewhere else, if we consider from the historical point of view, in terms of a history with a long duration, is in fact an idea that has just emerged.

Because it was in the 1970s that what we define as the awakening of ecological awareness was born. After literature began to raise awareness,

we moved objectively from an issue that was the subject of debate in limited circles, especially in the field of science, to an issue debated around the world, studied in everyday life and in college.

I teach History of Ecology at the Faculty of Science Po – where the French political class is educated – and the Greta Thunberg phenomenon has shown how these questions really motivate and are of major concern to young people. So it's true that, from the point of view of the habits, everything is still difficult, we still have to push for change. But it is also true that only fifty, or sixty years have passed since the first formulation of some particular ideas. And, naturally, it takes time yet to radically change habits.

I believe that rather than relying on ever-increasing awareness, intense legal action is needed. I was very impressed with the measure taken about ten years ago, on the right to smoke in public spaces. This was an impressive experience for me, because from one day to another, an entire continent, in 24 hours, radically changed its habits.

Some said “It will be impossible, it won't work”. Even so, today we live in a world where it would seem absurd if you could smoke in restaurants, in train cars, or on planes. Only one measure, one act, was enough to radically change mentality and habits. In my opinion, more than cultural awareness, it is necessary to go through the law. The law is the fastest instrument we have to change the world because we don't need to change the mentality, it is the change of customs that will change the mentality, not the other way around.

#### A NEW METAPHYSICS OF GREEN

A profound transformation has occurred in Botany over the last fifty to sixty years. That is linked to Biology's internal changes, to the fact that Biology, from the 1960s onwards, since Lynn Margulis reaffirmed that the eukaryotic cell – at the base of any superior structure – was born by symbiosis and not by competition. Not by the war mechanism of all against all, which Darwin considered to be the key mechanism of the evolution of the species.

It was from that point that Botany was born again. From the moment it was recognized that peaceful – in quotes – symbiosis, coopera-

tion, and interaction of living beings are much more important in the history of the planet's life than competition and war; that plants – which are those beings that, as autotrophic organisms, do not need to kill another living being in order to live – assumed a more significant epistemological role. Incidentally, there was also an internal revolution in Botany because figures like Stefano Mancuso appeared in Italy, Francis Hallé in France, and Anthony Trewavas in England, transforming this science that, among others, was treated like Cinderella. It was a little lost in the classification of plant diversity, and they managed to make it a kind of new alternative metaphysics of green.

Stefano's research revolutionized the idea of intelligence because saying that plants are intelligent not only means recognizing a different status for these living beings – that seemed to us to be of a lower level or, in some way, less living than others. Further, it means forcing us to revolutionize the very idea of intelligence because if plants are intelligent, it means that intelligence has nothing to do with the presence of a brain, neuroscience, or perception. Instead, it invests or can invest the whole body, not just one organ, but the totality of corporal existence, for example.

#### PANDEMIC AND NARCISSISM

From this point of view, the study of plants ended up being much more important than the study of Zoology, also for making us more sensible to this idea of interconnection of everything with everyone. Now, for example, mushrooms and bacteria are the new frontiers for understanding in what sense life and its power are not linked to the anatomical and physiological qualities of living beings. It is one of the great learnings of this pandemic if we think from a more philosophical point of view, from a common reflection. The most interesting were two things: first, the fact that the virus's arrival took human beings out of this kind of negative narcissism, in which we had been locked up for the last ten years. We go from the narcissism of someone who places himself at the top of creation, man as the most sublime of terrestrial creatures, to the negative narcissism of who wants

to be at the apex of destruction, man as the most destructive of species, the most dangerous one. It was, then, a form of contemplation of our own exceptionality. But the arrival of this tiny creature – capable of threatening the life of species or the most technologically advanced civilization in human history – told us that no, in reality, destruction is a force generously distributed in nature, and especially independent of anatomical and cerebral qualities. You don't have to be big and strong or to have a brain to generate incredible effects on the planet.

This is the key to life. Living beings produce effects that are not proportionally linked to their dimension, size, anatomical qualities, and physiology. That's what life is, the fact that there is an incredible disparity between cause and effect.

## BRAZIL

I have a very particular relationship with Brazil; my first book *A vida sensível* (Cultura e barbárie, 2010), which I wrote ten years ago, was released in the first world edition in Brazil, then in France, finally in Italy, by chance and thanks to the generosity of some friends. Therefore, it is a nation, or better, a culture with which I have a deep and lasting friendship. Also, and especially for these latest works closely linked to ecological and biological themes, Brazilian culture is definitely much richer and more avant-garde if compared to European or American traditions, for at least two reasons. Firstly, because it is a culture that soon opened up to exchange with other forms of autochthonous cultures and was able to recognize the truth of the arguments that these cultures conveyed. I am thinking, for example, of Bruce Albert's work with Davi Kopenawa and the power that anthropological research had in this case, in recognizing that all species are endowed with some form of self-awareness. Or even the works of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. There is richness in Brazil, almost a cultural biodiversity, nowadays completely absent from European states. Then there is a matter of fact, concrete. How to say, Rio is a city with a special magnetism. But because of its history, the opposition between nature and culture, a common trait in European urban experience, is almost impossible. Rio is a city lying by the sea, but



its interior bears forests that are almost impossible to find in Europe. Forests of such power – that are in fact artificial, cultivated – which have regained almost entirely their right to give shape to the landscape.

So there is – at least, I have always felt this way – this awareness that being in a place means negotiating, with thousands of other species, one's own right to shape that place. There is the understanding that we can never consider ourselves the absolute masters, the architects, and the landscapers of a place. We always have to negotiate with the other landscapers from that place who don't have a human face.

### **POSSIBLE FUTURE**

Ecology and the set of reflections that are somehow linked to this current, to this science, are the only possible future because it is the only dimension that can claim a form of absolute universalism. Deep down, beyond any divisions – man and woman, black and white, European and non-European – comes the fact that we are citizens of a single planet, before any other possible determination. So, affirming oneself as part of a planetary life makes the rest of identity determinations accessory or secondary; also because these reflections help to understand that identity, even when specific and biological, is always a mosaic, a patchwork, a mixture, a miscegenation of previous identities.

Taking Darwin seriously means to take seriously the fact that even humanity is a strange form of ephemeral patchwork, that has distinct traits and identities. It means seriously considering the birth, the fact that our identity is already a repetition of at least two lives that preceded us, and from a biological point of view, it is a mixture. Essentially, in nature, everything is a bastard. It's all already impure, and any claim to a strong, real, ontological identity is somehow impossible. It seems to me that this is the only possible way for us to rediscover a common ground of understanding and political agreement.

### **BEFORE, SOMETHING DID NOT EXIST**

We are very conditioned by an idea of technique, which sees technology as a power, as an extra-anatomical complement that compensates

for some physical, anatomical lack. By this Platonic myth that all animal species have innate powers of defense, running, attacking, war, and that man, on the contrary, is a naked species and that, therefore, has the language and technology that allow him to supply these physical and physiological faults. It is a myth that has permeated almost the entire history of culture, encouraged by Christianity itself, and which came back with force in German culture between 1800 and 1900. This idea spurs all reflections on the media and is reflected in what MacLuhan saw, the media as extensions of the human body. It's a very thought-provoking idea, but it's a little narcissistic because it makes technology an instrument for humanizing the world. Narcissistic, especially because it attributes only to man the capacity for arbitrary, voluntary, and contingent manipulation of reality.

When, in fact, all living species consciously operate to transform the world around them, to readapt it to their existence. From worms to plants, being alive implies radically modifying the surrounding space and making that space habitable, whereas it wasn't before. This extension of the technique to all species matters because it makes us understand that any natural place is an artifact, an artificial space. Every time we enter a space like this, which has an absolute appearance of naturalness we are entering a space in which each living being has modeled the reality around them and negotiates every day with other species the shape of the world in which they are living. Therefore, we also have to learn to recognize that the space we live in is artificial, that we need to negotiate this landscape with other species, and that everything is an artifact. Also, the air we breathe is not natural but produced by millions of plants that have bacteria that emit oxygen into the atmosphere daily, making it habitable for us.

“Nature” is for us like an enormous technological laboratory, not only because living beings modify the reality around them but because they also continue to modify themselves. What we call sex, for example, is this fantastic invention according to which the reproduction of an individual involves the artificial manipulation of his identity through joining two distinct genetic assets. This is also a form of technical, contingent and arbitrary, reassembly of identity. This means that our identities are

artifacts, they are artificial as well. In truth, to be created, I had to experience a kind of manipulation of a genetic code that goes through particular processes. And that makes me an artifact, something that didn't exist before, something with an unstable existence. I won't be able to prolong my existence to infinity, just as each artifact won't be able to either.

We should therefore think again about what technique is. And this seems to me to be the most innovative point of this idea, the fact that technology is not opposed to nature, but something that living beings use to strengthen relationships with other species. This is the most important legacy of the technical transformations we must affirm. Technology is not a war against nature, nor can it be an attempt to conquer sovereignty over other lives. It is always the space and the fastest way to establish a dialogue with other species different from ours.

#### INTERGENERATIONAL BEING

I think we should drop the idea of generation, which is quite curious. It had its own meaning since romanticism, when people began to think that youth, within society, had the role of cultural, political, and social transformation agents. This conviction lasted for at least two hundred years. Now it is no longer like that, nor will it be viable to be like that. We cannot, and we no longer have to wait for young people, those born after us, the youngest, to radically transform the world. The idea of generation is itself very fascist. The idea that there are some shared truths just because of the sharing of a time of birth. The idea of generation is slightly like the idea of dialect, of jargon, as it presupposes linguistic truths or truths linked to a sense of belonging somewhere. Or even related to the condition of belonging to a profession – these are esoteric because they are not shareable with others. This idea seems to me not only silly but also very dangerous. Maybe what you say, that I'm not a millennial but can be associated with them, means that something in me doesn't correspond in any way to my generation. And that might be the reality for everyone.

Biologically, our body is composed of parts from generations of different ages. From a genetic point of view, there are pieces of me that

come from my mother or my grandfather, and pieces put together at the last minute, like a Japanese bucket made of very old pieces and some very recent pieces. I am, therefore, intergenerational and intercultural as well, because I continually mix elements coming from my daughter with cultural forms from the Middle Ages. Perhaps the key for something to become socially shared is this indifference, what is the date of birth of this idea, when was this idea formed... And this seems to be the best experience that one can have in contact with nature, when you start to know a little about trees, when entering a forest you realize that you are in a chronologically crazy space because not only are the trees and plants distinct ages, but each of the species come from different times. A forest thus testifies to this fundamental asynchrony of everything that lives, and that is what makes a culture alive, the fact that discourse can include within itself expressions and words that come from completely incompatible ages, of birth and historical.

EMANUELE COCCIA

Born in Fermo, Italy. Until the age of 19, studied at the Instituto Técnico Agrário Garibaldi, in Macerata, which is why he kept his eye on plants during his higher studies in philosophy. Coccia transits through important academic centers in Florence, Berlin, Freiburg, New York and Paris. He is a full professor of philosophy at EHESS in Paris. His works have been translated in several countries and propose the broadening of the perception of life, its systems and the world. In Brazil, his books *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (Cultura e Barbarie, 2018) and *Metamorphoses* (Dantes, 2020) are available. He is Colette's father.



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Artist, etc. graduated in Visual Arts at F + F Schule Fur Kunst un Design, Zurich. Worked on the inventory of the International Performance Art Archive (1999 - 2000). Since 2018 she works on the translation of the Performance Context Diagram to Portuguese. In 2014 she founded Farol Arte e Ação, an independent initiative dedicated to the notion of mobility, a space for distribution and communication through art. Collaborations with Capacete Residency (Rio de Janeiro), PERFOLINK (Chile) and PARSCHE (Köln), among others. She is interested in Performance as an open system. She is currently taking part at the Ecodesign Program at Design ao Vivo School. Margit is an English teacher, she works as translator, and is assistant to ants in Piraquara, Paraná, Brasil.