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Francis of Assisi and the Wolf: Nonviolence as a moral value of biophilia

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According to Stephen Kellert (1996; 1997), moral values provide one of the potential ways through which biophilia can be expressed. Without doubt, love for life (biophilia) goes together well with the moral value of nonviolence. But is the contrary also true? That is, does the ethical choice of nonviolence offer any evolutionary advantage? Biophilia is an attitude of human behaviour forged by evolution (Wilson, 1984). Tens of thousands of years are required before a human tendency becomes established as a phylogenetically adapted behavioural pattern (Kellert & Wilson, 1993). But if the behavioural model offers an advantage in terms of fitness, sooner or later it will be expressed. If the moral value of a pro-biophilic choice offers an advantage in terms of fitness (Barbiero, 2011), then nonviolence will be expressed, sooner or later, as a human generalised behavioural pattern. It is simply a question of time.

However, the question remains whether nonviolence, as an expression of biophilia, other than expressing a survival advantage, can lead to the openness that Aldo Capitini dreamt of, when we ask whether reality is able to abide by nonviolence, and by reality we intend the hard laws of biology (Falcicchio, 2015). This can only be verified if the moral principles of nonviolence activate in some way genetically determined learning rules (Barbiero, 2014). An interesting model could come from the idea of placating the "ferocious beasts", not in the sense of a 'lion tamer' who demands submission, but like a saint who, through his clemency, tames the fierce (Barbiero, 2007); as was the case of Francis of Assisi and the Wolf of Gubbio.

According to an oral tradition (*Fioretti di San Francesco*, XXI), an "enormous, terrible and ferocious" wolf suddenly appeared in Gubbio causing great harm to animals and men alike; until one day when "Saint Francis took the *inverse*[1] road to the place where the wolf was" (my italics). The wolf did not seem to be afraid and "it came to meet Saint Francis with its mouth wide open", but Francis called to it and said: "Come here, brother wolf" and the Saint spoke frankly to the wolf – Saint Francis's discourse holds all the pride and boldness of nonviolence. He looked into the face of wickedness in the absence of judgement or doubt: wicked is wicked and good is good ("Brother wolf, you are doing much harm in these parts and you have committed great evils, harming and killing the creatures of God without His permission. You have not only killed and devoured animals, but you have dared to kill men made in God's image. For this, you deserve to be hanged as the terrible thief and murderer that you are"); here we can note the awareness that violence is destructivity, which is an end in itself (Barbiero, 2004), and that it only provokes more violence in return ("and the people clamour and murmur against you, and this entire land is your enemy"). Finally, the historical (and personal) 'opening up' occurs, the turning point that goes beyond prejudice, that transcends the conflict and requires the integration inside us of the enemy ("But I want, brother wolf, to make peace between you and them, so that you will no longer offend them, and they will forgive your past crimes, and neither men nor dogs will chase you any longer"). It is interesting to note that to face the "enemy"[2], the "nemesis", it seems that a transformation is necessary. Choosing the *inverse* road to go to meet the enemy (see also Genesis 33.1) is a radical change of perspective: the "enemy" becomes the "adversary"[3] (Barbiero, 2004). Here it becomes clear just how much the "Wolf of Gubbio" is the

[1]The word "inverso" was used in the original *Fioretti di San Francesco* (*The little Flowers of St. Francis*), a text on the life of St. Francis attributed to Tommaso da Celano). In old Italian, the preposition "inverso" meant to "change course" or even "to con-vert oneself", in that it is derived from the verb "to invert". I believe that Tommaso da Celano, the XIII century biographer of Francis of Assisi used this preposition to highlight the fact that in order for Francis to approach the wolf he had to "in-vert", i.e. change, his attitude towards him. The entire story seems to suggest this interpretation. The wolf reacts ferociously towards everyone, but it is a reaction to the fear and hate that the people feel towards him. Instead, Francis's inner attitude towards the wolf is different; he does not fear or hate the wolf. If my observation is correct, Tommaso da Celano is telling us that Francis has, above all, "inverted" his own attitude.

[2] The word "enemy" derives from the ancient Greek "Nemesis", the goddess that sooner or later revenged injustices. It was not possible to argue with or escape from Nemesis because it was she who dealt out what was due and restored justice. By extension, by the enemy it is intended he with whom no negotiations are possible.

[3] The word "adversary" derives from the Latin word "ad versus", i.e. "to come against (in opposition)". With an adversary, rules can be established (as in sport), common ground identified and agreements or compromises made.

external projection of "Francis's inner wolf". The wolf is the terrifying, the unresolved, the unfulfilled that waits to be fulfilled. It is Francis's "dark" side.

Let us imagine that (1) biophilia is the genetically determined link between Man and Nature; (2) Nature is the external reflection of Man's inner energies; (3) energies can be integrated, guarded and valorized, instead of "dominated"; (4) nonviolence is the practice of relationship we need to integrate, govern and liberate these energies. If this is correct, we must recognize, using the language of today, that Saint Francis was a man endowed with extraordinary biophilia. His sermons to the birds and to the fish ("that stayed to listen to him"), the legend of the Wolf of Gubbio and his retreat into the forest are all stories that make us think about a man who lived in harmony with his wild soul. In the *Laudes Creaturarum* (Canticle of the Creatures) Francis turns to all creatures – living and non living – calling them brothers and sisters. He feels bound to all the natural world, a bond that goes far beyond love for human brothers and sisters, far beyond love for animals and plants. Francis is a brother to the moon, to the sun, to fire, to water, to the wind, to death. One who proclaims to be a brother of the stars and of Nature is wild and cosmic (Barbiero, 2015). Francis seems to recognize Nature as the mirror image of his inner energies that are integrated and valued. Francis has evolved: he needed to achieve harmony with Nature by progressively integrating the wildness that resided within him. Francis is the man that enlightened his "Shadow" and fulfilled the unfulfilled, achieved his inner cosmos, and only in this way could he experience being the master of homologous elements in the external cosmos. In some way he was able to penetrate deep down into the depths of his being, incarnating the Eden-like landscape within himself, where Adam "presided over dry ground and ruled over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the sky and over each living being that creeps on the earth" (Genesis 1:28; *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 5th revised edition, 1997). The reference here to dry ground gives the sense of accomplishment: the breaking of a mother's waters delivers a baby to a new, dry world. To carry out this work of inner integration, Francis seems to follow the divine suggestion to the letter (Genesis 2:16-17): "eat the fruit of every tree in the garden" (Genesis 3:2), because to eat you must eat, "but not of the tree of knowledge of the fulfilled and the unfulfilled[4] for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely transform[5]" (Genesis 3:3). Because when it is ready, when the fruit is truly mature, then it will be possible to integrate even the most dark and terrible parts. But if a man is not ready, if he eats the fruit before the time is right, he will not be able to transform. And the wolf will eat him, the enemy will win. There are no short-cuts, there is no escape.

[4] Here, I propose a new translation of the original Hebrew word עֵ֣ץ הַדַּ֔עַת טוֹב וָרָ֑ע (*Etz ha-da'at tov ve-ra*), usually translated as "tree of knowledge of good and evil". My proposal is based on the fact that the noun *tov*, usually translated as "good", con also mean "complete" or "fulfilled", while the noun *ra*, usually translated as "evil", can also imply "incomplete" or "unfulfilled".

[5] The Hebrew noun מות, usually translated as "death", can sometimes mean "transformation" or "mutation". I have opted for this translation, which seems more appropriate in this context.

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