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POLARITIES LIMITS AND THRESHOLDS



ART FRONTIERS: TERMINUS AND LIMEN

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ABSTRACT

Eugenio Trías “philosophy of the limit” is the starting point for a historical analysis of the concept of border or “limes”, understood in its essence as end and beginning in topological reciprocity. The being is exposed as the limit of the world, positioned facing the mystery or non-world, demonstrating critical reasoning when in dialogue with its “shadows”, as well as the ability to create symbols, which mediate resources that, indirectly and analogically, send out antennae to this hermetic enclosure. Thus, this borderline being, whose “human condition” can only be achieved if this being freely chooses to reject ‘inhuman’ behaviour, whether deficient or excessive, and finds in ethics and aesthetics the foundations that, in due measure, will guarantee the right to a ‘good life’ in freedom, peace, justice and respect for others.

INTRODUCTION

In the era we live in, the proposed theme is recognisably topical. Between positivity and negativity - dominant in the West -, sunk in all kinds of sensory requests required by the means of production of mass hyper-consumption to achieve instant pleasure, superficiality and excess, we have decided to draw on the reflections of someone who has spent most of his life addressing these issues. And he did so in a singular, unique way. We would like to point out that the following quotations are literal translations of the Spanish texts.

2. AN IDEA OF LIMIT

The Spanish philosopher Eugenio Trías, particularly in *Lógica del limite* (1991), reflects on the concept of limit, a topic of such importance that took him around 30 years of in-depth research. He has written a prolific and fruitful number of works that were truly astonishing in content and form, where the innovative, daring and powerful Philosophy of the Limit was forged. And which is an unavoidable reference in our paper on the subject.

According to the thinker, the Romans called *limitanei* to the inhabitants of the limes or frontier areas that separated Rome’s empire from the lands inhabited by barbarians, or strangers, whose language and culture were considered savage, inferior.

The *limitanei* formed the front of the army that defended the frontiers of the Empire on the frontiers of conquered and occupied territories. They were soldiers and farmers at the same time and, on these spacious *frontier* areas, on the one hand they found separation, on the other hand they experienced a strange phenomenon of cultural miscegenation where the values and customs of both sides merged, making those living there culturally richer. Thus, the *limitanei* (or inhabitants of the *limes* or *frontier*), usually soldiers/farmers, cultivated the land in times of peace, swapping the plough for weapons when war came. Despite the permanent instability, contacts and exchanges took place between the two sides, which led to the Romanization of the barbarians by the *limitanei* and, at the same time, these becoming also *barbarians*.

So, instead of closing, the *frontier* was also an inhabited strip or passage zone to the other side, the unknown side, shrouded in mystery, presenting itself as a challenge, inviting people to cross over. As if a hypnotic curiosity was the greatest mark of a hidden power that belonged to this shifting fringe, fit for the most fearless and adventurous. While the barbarians aspired to gain Roman citizenship, the frontier Romans wanted to conquer more land; they wanted to extend their domains by subjugating the neighbouring peoples who lived on the other side of the frontier. Thus, the *limes* were established as the limit of the empire and, at the same time, as the limit between the Roman world and the barbarian jungle that extended beyond. On “this” side there was a civilised Rome or rational world, on the “other” side there was uncivilised, lawless, irrational barbarism. In literal translation: “therefore the *limes* shared the rational and the irrational, or the civilised and the wild. It was an intense and conflictual space of mediation and liaison. In turn, it brought together and split roman and barbarian spaces; it acted as coupling and disjunction; It was conjunctive and disjunctive” (Trías, 1991, p. 16).

Trías also used the ancient rituals that the Romans applied when founding a new city to support his *Philosophy of the Limit*. These rituals, followed by peoples long before the Romans, particularly the Etruscans, were a complex web of religious ceremonies; they emphasised the sacredness of the boundaries of the land, protected by the god Terminus, whose violation entailed harsh penalties for those who committed it.

Joseph Rykwert, in *La idea de ciudad* (2002, pp. 39-87), takes a masterly approach to the complex ritual of founding a city, namely Rome. In the text, he describes the opening of the *sulcus primigenius* as the most important act of this founding ritual. According to the author, it was up to the founder, covering his head with the flap of his toga, to trace this initial furrow on the ground to delimit the perimeter of the city. Holding the tines of a bronze plough, pulled by a white heifer and a bull (the heifer was on the inside, i.e. on the left, while the bull was on the outside of the furrow).

Going anti-clockwise, the plough had to be tilted slightly so that all the earth fell into the furrow. If it didn't, the attendants would put all the lumps of earth that had been left outside in their place. Whenever he reached the site of one of the gates, the founder would raise the plough in the air (*portare*) to interrupt the furrow, then resume it until the entire perimeter of the city was completed. Walls or ramparts were then erected over the furrow opened by the plough. Because the limit was considered sacred, anyone who crossed the *sulcus primigenius* was immediately killed; only the gates, which were not sacred, allowed access or exit for people, animals or goods, and the cemetery remained outside the enclosure. Therefore, all traffic out or in was only done through the gates.

However, before the *sulcus primigenius* was laid out (*designare*, to draw) there was a rite called *inauguratio* (good omen), which included the so-called *contemplatio* (contemplation), carried out in a lengthy manner by the augur or priest who, from the top of an elevation near the chosen site, observed the sky; first trying to understand the positioning of the celestial temple or perfect, ideal temple, which served as a reference for the construction of the earthly, real temple, crystallised in the city to be built. Then, he studied the position of sunrise and sunset, determining an axis called the *decumanus*; crossing it at an angle of 90 degrees to determine the *cardus*, in the North/South direction, an axis also designated as night by the position of the North Star. This study, all of it imbued with a sacred character, formalised the good or bad omen for the new city to be built there which followed the resulting coordinates. Afterwards the augur, while pointing with a stick and describing the physical elements that his gaze encompassed and which would be the references of the limits of the space to be inhabited, would utter phrases or words of magical-religious meaning (*verba concepta*), most of the time incomprehensible. And he would draw a circle on the ground, where the two axes (*cardus* and *decumanus*) crossed, to direct the positioning of the new city. The projection of the celestial temple idealised in the act of contemplation was symbolically drawn on the ground. For his part, the *haruspex* (pagan priest) studied and read the positive or negative auguries in the winds, clouds and birds' - both indigenous and migrating - liver and entrails. That place would become a sacred space when the plough drew the initial furrow of the new city, as described above. And the good omen for the new city was guaranteed.

Using these metaphors of *limes* and *sulcus primigenius*, the philosopher devised a bold and innovative conceptual theory that he called the philosophy of the limit. In this, the central space is occupied by the *frontier enclosure* or founding enclosure which, in turn, unfolds into the *appearing or world enclosure* and the *hermetic enclosure*. Forming a trilogy of enclosures, in dissonance with previous philosophical currents based on a dichotomous or dual relationship. But the great philosophical novelty lies in the ontological character of the *limes* or limit: the being is this limit or frontier, assuming itself as the *limit being*, or inhabitant of the *limes*, of the frontier. Therefore, the subject or being, given existence, is the *very limit* that unfolds in the other two enclosures. As “*frontiersmen* we are the limits of the world”, states the philosopher, of this phenomenological world that we inhabit, arrange and know, standing before the mystery of the *hermetic enclosure*, place of the unknown, the enigma, the unknowable, of everything that is sacred or secret and transcends us, the domain of unreason, of nothingness.

In other words, as existents we dwell on the frontier between the world and mystery, between reason and unreason, between being and nothingness. We are the embodiment of this *frontier* state of being that, within itself, feels the ambivalence of this intense interaction between *coupling* and *disjunction*, between union and split of two poles. The meaning of the preposition between must be emphasised due to its importance in the relationship with the pairs of attached nouns, embodying the role of frontier between the two concepts or enclosures. This *frontier* positioning gives it the substance immanent to the *frontier enclosure* which, as mentioned before, by being the founding entity, it unites and separates the two enclosures in a continuous dynamic process. This process implies the presence of *coupling forces* and *disjunctive forces* in an intense interplay, both of which constitute the core of the *frontier being*. It is this internal dynamism of constant connection and splitting that gives the *frontier* subject the vital importance of eternal renewal. It implies

a coexistence of the two forces that act permanently, without one being able to render the presence of the other ineffective. If this action were to happen, the very concept of limit would be greatly damaged, and its existence would be cancelled. The philosopher calls this internal dynamism the *principle of variation*, similar to what happens in music.

Eugenio Trías, in the sentence “the being of the limit that recreates and varies itself”, puts forward a philosophical proposition that defines the *philosophy of the limit*. By using the verbs recreate and vary, he qualitatively determined a principle of permanent renewal and reinvention, contrary to any abulic or lethargic practices. Topologically, the being, as the *being of the limit*, is constituted as the limit of the world it inhabits, facing the *mystery* which, in its hermetic way, constitutes a realm that resists any effort by logical reason to clarify it completely. This *hermetic enclosure*, which is impossible to access directly, is the self-enclosed place where mysterious *shadows* dwell, where everything that escapes and is hidden from logical or factual reason fits. Therefore, there is a limiting boundary that prevents reason from accessing this impenetrable enclosure.

In order to solve the problem, the philosopher opens up logical reason to its own internal criticism, in other words, reason recognises its own limitations by flatly refusing to tackle issues from the irrational sphere. This self-reflexive critique, made at the limit, opens reason to dialogue with its *shadow*, the *unreason*. Reason then becomes *frontier reason*: by opening itself up to dialogue with everything that makes up this immense universe of shadows called *no-reason*: madness, myth, sacredness, divinity, religion, magic, passion, divination, occult, exorcism, palmistry, intuition, witchcraft, sinisterness, in short, metaphysics. Even so, *frontier reason* alone does not guarantee complete access to this enclosure of *shadows*, at the cost of the most daring and profound lucubrations. Something else was needed to make this opening possible. In the *symbol*, Trías found the third vertex of the proposal named *ontological triangle*: in it, the *being of the limit* forms the upper angle, while the frontier reason and the symbol correspond to the two lower angles. The *frontier reason* and the symbol are the two ways of *exposing* the *being of the limit*.

As a result, the philosopher had found the master key to achieving the desired access, albeit always precarious and in an *indirect and analogue* way, as he postulates; so that the *frontier* subject could establish bridges or contact with this dark and irrational universe. Therefore, the *great leap* was made so that existence could rise to its condition of *being of the limit*, or *inhabitant of the frontier* between the world and the mystery, between reason and unreason, between being and nothingness. From now on, the deepest yearnings, dreams, utopias and all the other unrealities that can be invoked have the possibility of being summoned in person in the sublime guise of the symbol. Indirectly and in an analogue way and also partially, it must be emphasised. Because both the *frontier reason* and the *symbolic supplement* endow the *frontier* with very special powers.

In *El hilo de la verdad* (2004), Trías sets out the *being of the limit*, broken down into seven sequential categories, connected to each other, in an effort to synthesise concepts developed by reason, which he *redefines as frontier reason*: matrix (naturing nature), existence (world), limes (or subject in relation with the limit), logos (or factual reason), frontier reason (criticism), symbol (or the mystic), and being of the limit. The seven categories, working as a whole, define the *being of the limit*. Thus, the *being* comes from the matrix or nature, is given to existence, becomes conscious as a subject put to the test by the limit, accesses the logos (word, writing, meaning and intelligence), endows itself

with a frontier reason in critical self-reflection on the forms and contents of factual reason, and, using the symbol as a partial, indirect and analogue bridge, launched into the mystery of the hermetic enclosure, finally assumes itself as a *being of the limit: or inhabitant of the frontier* between the world and the mystery, between reason and unreason, between being and nothingness. If the matrix is the foundation of everything, described as the principle of principles, it is also the end or the final destination that awaits us once we have reached the limit of our physical existence: it corresponds to the *hermetic enclosure*.

The word *limit* can have various etymological interpretations. On the one hand, it can be understood as *terminus* or final *limit*, term, termination, end of what is on this side; on the other hand, it can function as *limen*, that is, threshold, sill or place of passage to the other side. So this ambivalence of meanings reveals the dynamic nature of the *limes*, where *coupling* and *disjunction* forces clash, without there being any hegemonic result for one side. Therefore, the Limit is both *terminus* and *limen*. Therefore, it can be inferred that the *disjunctive force* of separation is defined in the *terminus*, while the *coupling*, in turn, can act in the *limen*. To put it more clearly: in the limit, understood as *terminus*, the *disjunctive forces* work, and the limit is assumed to be a limiting end or final; in turn, in the limit, understood as *limen*, the *conjunctive forces* work, so the limit, understood as being a kind of threshold or sill of a door, is now a place or zone of passage to the other side. This is of paramount importance for understanding the concept of limit. Without it, the internal dynamic that vitalizes it is lost.

The *philosophy of the limit* enshrines the concept of *frontier*, without it being understood as a simple dividing line between two territories. If that were the case, it would simply be a dead, lifeless line. On the contrary, Eugenio Trías presents it as a wide inhabited zone or *frontier enclosure*, like a fringe of land full of life where the *frontier* exists and acts. A *frontier* where people live, sometimes in intense harmony, other times where the turbulence seems to reach a critical point of rupture in the relationship established with the other side. In this harmony/entropy opposition, perhaps the most natural state is that of a relationship established in *dynamic equilibrium*. An intense equilibrium between rest and movement, between concord and discord, between acceptance and rejection, between inclusion and exclusion, between *philia* and *phobia*, between union and divorce, between consensus and dissension; ultimately, between love and hate, between war and peace.

Therefore, the *frontier*, which cannot be a place of split or rejection, is based on the interaction between two opposing spheres, characterised by a reciprocal relationship between identification and differentiation. Or, in simpler terms, between identity and difference. Delving into the *ontological, topological and philosophical turns of the limit*, Trías, in *El hilo de la verdad* (2004), states that the slash (/) placed between two opposing words or ideas cannot be understood as just a line (literal translation): “it is not a simple linear line. It denotes a space or an area, or an inhabitable fringe. The Romans called it *limes*. It projects an idea of the subject, or our condition. This slash designates the limit; it is the sign that designates it. It is its very emblem” (p. 114). Therefore, in the proposition formulated by the philosopher - *being of the limit that recreates itself* - the relation being/nothingness corresponds to *ontological truth*; in turn, the relation sameness/alterity corresponds to *topological truth*; and finally, the relations unity/multiplicity or rest/movement correspond to or define *philosophical truth*. To quote (again in literal translation): “the limit is thus *said of being* (and its reference, which is *nothingness*); of itself (and its own *otherness*); and of ‘everything’ that, through this nexus of the limit with itself and with

its otherness, is promoted: the eternal return of the same; the recreation and variation of the same limit that is given (as being) in existence” (p. 115).

Returning to the slash (/), in the relation being/nothingness, for example, it incorporates the idea of the limit between the two concepts. But it does so in a vivid way because, in essence, the slash is the limit itself, and the latter is animated by *coupling* and *disjunction* forces at the same time, it means that the limit as *terminus* splits the being from nothingness; but, in the same way, the limit as *limen* opens or connects or refers the being to nothingness. So, it follows that the limit functioning as *terminus* is of a *disjunctive* nature, and in the role of *limen* it is invested with a *conjunctive* nature. We can split the two functions for a better understanding; however, in absolute terms, they cannot be a matter of reflection unless they function as a whole, where both act at the same time, in permanent dialogue and conflict.

3. FRONTIER ETHICS AS *PRAXIS*

Addressing ethics nowadays means taking risks by daring to touch on a subject that, if not taboo, has been consigned to a long silence, determined by circumstantial convenience. It has become an uncomfortable and inconvenient word, to be avoided as if it caused leprosy, or something similar. For our part, it should be enthroned as a goddess. Is it worth it? We think so, above all for the opportunity to get in touch with the philosopher’s thoughts on a subject that is as problematic as it is important today, despite the surrounding silence.

The *being of the limit*, as the limit of the world, is subject to the quality of the actions it takes. Because it lives in a community regulated by norms and laws that, at all times, determine the behaviour of everyone in the group. Freedom, right to a good life, equality, solidarity, compassion, dignity, safety, justice and peace, among many other values, can be said to be part of the *human condition*; all of which can be understood as universal moral qualities. And if morality can be recognised in the just nature of actions, it is because they describe the *human* side of the *human condition*. Unlike this, the *inhuman*, by pretending to be *absolutely infinite*, although it is admitted by *frontier reason*, rejects it in praxis. Because the *inhuman* is opposed to the human condition.

Trías, in *Ética y condición humana* (2000) states that ethics corresponds to the “practical use of reason”. But, (continuing in literal translation): “it is a question of developing what can be understood by ethics from a reason that is conceived as frontier reason; or the order of motivations and goals that, from this way of conceiving reason, mediate the sphere of action, or praxis. Both the character and nature of the principles that govern it and the objective and purpose that can be given to this action are radically changed if this reason is understood as practical frontier reason” (p. 27). And then the philosopher argues that a possible frontier ethics is right, as a logical consequence of the type of actions that are in line with frontier reason.

It is part of the *human condition* to live an existence determined by the Limit: to live in the *world*, or near phenomenological happenings, raised to the limits of that world through *frontier reason*, in a privileged situation of dialogue with the shadows of mystery of the *hermetic enclosure*. In this way, our existence is, from the outset, “marked and designed by this Limit that determines and defines it. A Limit that establishes its own Measure, and it is, at turns, distant from its natural, native origin and its ultimate border, in which it is

inexorably attached to the *hermetic enclosure*. In this limiting Measure, our own existence finds the indicator sign of its own condition, to which corresponds to the *humana conditio*" (p. 34). For the philosopher, this means that the concept of Limit intrinsically implies "that *humana conditio* that all ethics must presuppose". Therefore, the inhuman degradation of the inhuman cannot be understood as a genuine *praxis* of ethics. Ethics, which cannot be imposed or regulated, has its fundamental and irreplaceable foundation in Freedom.

This raises the question: how can the concepts of good life and *freedom* be combined? Is there freedom in a way of life that, because it is a *good life* in the ethical sense, strictly excludes all those practices that are typical of the *inhuman*? Isn't that an irrefutable contradiction? This is the so-called *ethical aporia*. So how do we get out of this crossroads? According to Trías, it is clear from the approach taken to the human condition that "it is clarified through the concept of what we are as inhabitants of the frontier" (p. 40). And, as mentioned before, the limit determines its own Measure, which the thinker explains: "Human measure 'recognises itself' then as the frontier between the animal and divine condition, or between the defective inclination that remains in the physical matrix or the *excessive* inclination to occupy the place of the gods. The good life can only be achieved by 'being', through the mediation of an imperative (such as the Pindaric), which man 'already is' virtually (inhabitant of the frontier, equidistant from the physical and the metaphysical, or from the animal and the divine)" (p. 41). So, it is inferred that the ideal of good life corresponds to a frontier position between *excess* and *defect*: the balance or good measure is in the middle, where what exists is neither *too much* or *too little*. In other words: *prudential intelligence* or *frontier intelligence* knows how to determine that point of ethical balance in human actions that define the good life, preventing it from being distorted by either *excess* or *defect*.

Eugenio Trías knew how to find this true pinnacle of his *philosophy of the limit*, which he called the *ethical imperative* or *ethical proposition*. As a product of frontier reason, "it proposes what the agent must respond to through the orientation of his action or the turn that can be given to it. This response determines the agent's possible changes of fortune or the adventures of his behaviour. The ethical qualification of the action depends on whether or not this response harmonises with what the imperative form *proposes* (towards the realisation of the human; towards the propagation of the inhuman). This response induces and leads to action, *praxis*, suitably guided by prudential intelligence, towards a good or bad life. The latter derives from all complicity in the generation of the *inhuman*" (pp. 46-47). In this way, the philosopher clarifies the nature of ethical behaviour of the subject of the action, in the sense of human or inhuman, in order to describe the content of the proposition, stating that it corresponds to the *linguistic expression of the practical use of frontier reason*:

"Work in such a way that the maxim that determines your behaviour and your action fits your own condition as a frontier inhabitant" (p. 47).

This is an empty formal command, in other words, it does not specify the content of this command. It only vaguely states that one's work must conform to the condition of being a frontier inhabitant. Nothing more. Therefore, the subject of the action has complete freedom to choose one's behaviour and actions. As for the meaning of one's actions, the subject also has the freedom to choose: opting for behaviour that is both humane and inhumane. Therefore, the subject has the power to decide freely

whether one wants a good life or, on the contrary, one to live at the mercy of excesses of all kinds; or by default, to remain in a kind of natural vegetative state, clinging to the things of this world.

The imperative sentence, which the philosopher postulates, is one, unique, universal (it is intended for all *frontier individuals*), it is prescriptive in that it invites a free response from each *ethical subject*; being unconditional in that it does not state any kind of prescription or norm, it opens itself up to a plurality of responses, so it is intended for all frontier crossers; and one must respond individually, in a radically singular way and in absolute freedom. In doing so, the response fulfils the *materialisation* of the ethical proposal, leading the ethical agent to define one's conduct, with the possibility of choosing between the human way and its opposite or inhuman way: one can choose decisions and actions in clear contradiction to their condition as *inhabitants of the frontier*, so this possibility is the guarantee of freedom in the response. And, as Trías says, "there is nothing more *human* than *inhuman* behaviour. What is more, only man, as Schelling understood, is capable of inhuman attitudes, behaviour and ways of life. Just as the brute or the beast are never brutal or bestial (but man is), neither can infra-human beings ever behave in an inhuman way or manner. But in the case of man, this way of behaving is not exceptional; it is often the rule. And all this is so because only man is free" (p. 48).

Only the human being has the capacity to hear or accept this ethical proposition, and from this comes the corresponding *elevation* to the status of *ethical subject*. Therefore, as the owner of a frontier reason, one can and must respond to this imperative proposition which, in a more simplified way, says: "Be frontier; be right in behaving as you are, limit and frontier (in relation to indeterminate "infinite" excesses and defects)" (p. 49). Thus, in fulfilling the imperative, if these excesses and defects are rejected, in a free act, one will have opted for the *good life*, in accordance with *human condition understood* as the *matrix foundation* of ethical conscience. As the philosopher puts it: "And the *matrix* cause of ethics guides and directs action in the direction of achieving a good life that is in accordance and harmonious with the imperative itself. Since this good life is achieved, within the real conditions of human behaviour, if one complies with the said imperative (in terms of the 'pindaric imperative', or orientation of elections and decisions towards that limit between two extremes of amorphous indeterminacy, by excess or by defect)" (p. 50).

It is reiterated that *ethical elevation* is only achieved if there is total freedom of conscious decision when choosing between the two possibilities: the *human* and the *inhuman*. If this freedom does not exist, due to internal or external pressures, there will no longer be an ethical subject. Then, the *human* will only be achieved at the cost of a fierce struggle with the possibility of the *inhuman*; without this struggle, there is no freedom. In the philosopher's words: "Only the human is achieved and conquered in a *fierce and obstinate struggle* with the possibility of the inhuman, which is the fearful possibility that leaves open the greatest treasure of the human being: his non-negotiable and inalienable freedom" (p. 98).

Therefore, the *humana conditio* is the foundation of ethical awareness, its matrix, an indelible mark of humanity. Without this mark, the human being, losing the condition of frontier inhabitant, and losing frontier reason, cannot free himself from the centripetal forces that, by default, bind him to mundane, physical, natural events. Or else, dragged down by the excessive and overflowing power of the centrifugal forces, undermined

by the Faustian desire to find (infinite) answers to everything, he ends up exceeding all limits, losing this notion of humanity in favour of inhuman practices. In this sense, the limit implies the presence of *frontier intelligence* (or *passionate* and *prudential intelligence*) so as not to lose this mediating position between world and mystery; between reason and unreason; between being and nothingness. Based on this reasoning, ethics emerges as the guarantor of the just measure that leads to *eudaimonia*, that timeless philosophical principle that enshrines the inalienable and universal right of human beings to *good life* in freedom. However, this *good life* implies ethical commitment, that supreme principle, without which humanity may run serious existential risks if it pursues an ungoverned path of complete bewilderment, among paroxysmal excesses of all kinds.

Ultimately, everything expressed here can be understood as a series of questions about the possible ethical criteria formalised by the philosopher. And perhaps it can be useful to position ourselves “in the face of nihilism, which wants to demolish all guidelines of value, or all ethical criteria (and also aesthetic or epistemological ones), and in the face of moral relativism, which does not accept any ethical proposal with universal and unconditional pretensions...” (p. 128). We might ask ourselves. Should “everything is relative” exclude a minimum of “critical sense”? Is everything possible in the name of freedom? Or is there a frontier freedom that corresponds to frontier ethics?

4. FRONTIER AESTHETICS

Eugenio Trías, in his posthumous work, *La funesta manía de pensar* (2018), writes «Wittgenstein adduces that “ethics and aesthetics are the same” or literally “are One”» (p.127). In this text, the Spanish philosopher justifies the existence of the *ethical imperative proposition*, unlike the German thinker. According to him, both the ethical and the aesthetic were “inexpressible”, existing only in silence.

We are interested in the idea of the sameness of ethics and aesthetics, even though the two concepts are different. However, despite this difference, the two need each other and cannot be separated: they imply each other. This leads us to believe that, for the Greeks, *eudaimonia* meant a good life, this good life went far beyond a life of material success alone. We think it refers to the quality of a *beautiful* life, in an ethical sense too: in the beautiful actions or decisions, in the just behaviour and attitudes of the good citizen. In the same way, the aesthetic work implies the presence (albeit concealed, veiled, silent) of *ethics*. So it stands to reason that a *good life* will be one in which all the moments that make it up are beautiful in themselves (aesthetically speaking) and good or just (ethically speaking). Otherwise, ethics and aesthetics *would not* be the same.

We return once again to Eugenio Trías to go through the intricacies of the so-called “Labyrinth of Aesthetics”, masterfully explained in *Ciudad sobre ciudad* (2001). We’re going to open a small parenthesis to address a concept that is very dear to the philosopher and that he dealt with in *Lo bello y lo siniestro* (1999a). In this work, he states that “the sinister is the condition and limit of the beautiful. Insofar as it is a condition, there can be no aesthetic effect without the sinister being present in some way in the artistic work. As much as it is a limit, the revelation of the sinister ipso facto destroys the aesthetic effect. Consequently, the accident is both a condition and a limit: *it must be present in the form of absence, it must be veiled. It cannot be unveiled*” (p. 17).

Having closed this parenthesis, we will return to the same concept of the sinister, but now in *Ciudad sobre ciudad* (2001). Trías states that the sinister, exposed in an open manner, self-destructs art, by revealing the mystery of the sacred (secret) without mediation and limits between the *hermetic enclosure* and the *enclosure of appearance or world*. Only symbolic mediation, at the limit, allows us not to violently force the mystery that must remain enclosed in the *hermetic enclosure*. It will therefore be necessary to mediate between the sinister and the beautiful in order to produce the *aesthetic effect* of the beautiful or the sublime. “In this sense, art is, like beauty, a veil; a produced veil (a veil of illusion) that undoubtedly allows the mystery to be glimpsed, without allowing it to expand immediately and without limits; but which at the same time preserves the mystery by always promoting it through mediations that are produced at the limit; indirect and analogue (or symbolic) mediations” (p. 174). In other words, without symbolic mediation, mystery is transformed into something astonishing, inhospitable, unheard of - sinister. And the sinister destroys art.

The nature of art raises questions, many of them unresolvable, and is an area where complexity and controversy go hand in hand. The answers are few and far between. So, the question arises: what is the factor that determines that a certain object is a work of art? Where does the artisticity of the work lie? In the company of the philosopher, we are at the beginning of the Labyrinth. And in order to make a prudent entrance, we must carry Ariadna’s thread to help us return victoriously. We will discuss it later.

In the first section of the labyrinthine path, according to Trías, we come up against what in microphysics is called *the principle of indeterminacy*: the paradoxical way that exists between understanding and explaining the work of art: if we understand it intuitively, we cannot explain it rationally; if we can explain it, we do not understand it. This difficulty raises a contradiction that the philosopher calls the *aesthetic aporia*. “Aesthetics is spontaneously confronted with this aporia; it always arises and reappears, interspersed between the question of artisticity and the eventual answer with which one wants to satisfy it” (p. 198). But there is a second antinomy or contradiction between understanding and explanation: “It so happens that the understanding (intuitive, in general terms) of a work as a work of art always takes place in relation to a perfectly individuated work. (...) This determination does not proceed through a generalisation in relation to a multitude of ‘concrete cases’. (...) Understanding is not only intuitive; it is also radically singular; it is always related to a work whose singular nature cannot be avoided or overlooked, and about which there can be no attempt to establish a possible ‘law’ valid for all cases” (p. 199). So, in the work of art in question, there is a kind of law or *internal guideline* that, coming from within itself, from the interior of this singular work, makes it a work of art.

Therefore, this internal guideline can only be applied to this work, only to this work and to no other; what’s more, this law that applies only and only to this (radically singular) work is of an unknown nature and essence, but has to do with the character of the work itself that is present there. Furthermore, this law is universal in character, as the thinker says: “In the same way, its character of ‘universality’ (its capacity to be recognised as such through the infinite induction that can take place in reception; for example, through the infinity of explanatory approaches that it can unleash, or the infinite hermeneutics that it tends to promote. A law is always postulated, specific to the work in question, the nature and essence of which is unknown. Or of which only its effects and consequences are

known” (p. 200). We can see the presence of this second antinomy between an unknown norm and its application to a *radically unique* work, i.e. a second face of the aporia.

As the philosopher points out, the internal guideline, although generalised, only governs the individual work; it is therefore *non-transferable* and *non-delegable*. It can never be applied in other cases, absolutely not.

In the second section of the labyrinth, the dialogue established with the work of art, knowledge is clarified and enriched by the degree of uniqueness and differentiation it presents. At the same time, in this relationship, feelings, sensations and emotions are aroused, both through the physical plasticity of the work itself and through the desire for knowledge that it motivates. In other words, contemplation gives pleasure at the same time as the process of knowledge typical of empirical experience takes place. Trías calls this symbiosis *intellectual hedonism*. “What appears in the work of art in disjunctive form in the relationship between intuitive understanding and rational knowledge, or between the empirical singularity of the object and the postulated universality and necessity of the hidden norm that rules over it, is exchanged in *conjunctive* form in this unexpected union of what is usually separated: enjoyment and understanding, pleasure and knowledge, feeling and intellect” (p. 204).

In this way, the core of the aesthetic aporia is reached, which, as the philosopher points out, is at the centre of all aesthetic reflection. The limiting boundary (as *terminus*) that appeared on the two sides of the aporia in a *disjunctive* way, this same boundary, now invested with the quality of *limen* (threshold, passage), establishes the coupling between knowledge and enjoyment or pleasure. “Here the limit is *limes*: the space or place of coupling; the space and place where what is always separated is brought together. In this sense, it can and should be said that all aesthetics is always and by necessity the aesthetics of the limit” (p. 206). Because in it we always come across the idea of a frontier - *limes* - which is inhabited from within by the aforementioned *conjunctive forces* and *disjunctive forces*, in situations of extreme complexity such as the aporia that we are trying to unravel here, following the shortcuts proposed by the philosopher. This is what happens with the aforementioned internal guideline or law, which can only be understood partially, precariously, and on the assumption that it *springs* from the single object or specimen in question: only what is possible can be known of this law, and only after the object exists; it is therefore a knowledge that is formed *a posteriori* - as an effect and result of the artistic work itself. It therefore has a physical body. It follows that knowledge involves the coupling of intellectual operations and sensibility, between the *sensible* and the *intelligible*. From this fusion, sensible ideas are born, completely rooted in the sensible, physical world of events. In art, these are called *aesthetic ideas*. “What is specific to the work of art is the transmission, in and from this intrinsic framework in the universe of sensible forms, of an aesthetic idea without which there can be no leap into the properly artistic universe. The aesthetic idea is, in a way, the *intelligible* content that unleashes what I previously called the “internal guideline” of the work, which it governs as the principle from which it can be determined in its strict artisticity. And this aesthetic idea is not forcibly added to the work or aesthetic object; it springs spontaneously from its own sensitive exposure” (p. 212).

The questions arise again. What is the resource that makes this *coupling* of the sensible and the intelligible possible? How can aesthetic ideas merge with the sensible forms of the work of art? How is this mediation possible without falling into abstractions?

In the text, Trías writes that Kant “calls this resource a *symbol*. And he considers that this produces the genuine ‘exhibition’ (in the sensible) of the ‘aesthetic idea’. And he adds that this union is not biunivocal. It is not a union such that each separate part of the idea corresponds to a separate part of the sensible segment” (pp. 212-213). This term-by-term correspondence is characteristic of metaphor and allegory. Trías, therefore, in line with Kant, states that this correspondence is *indirect and analogue*. “This notion of symbol serves as a decisive clue to guide us in the thorny and difficult territory of aesthetics, which has its peculiar Minotaur in what I have called the ‘aesthetic aporia’. Aesthetics is therefore a veritable labyrinth centred around the threatening central presence of the monster. Perhaps the symbol can serve us as Ariadna’s thread to pass through this labyrinth without fear” (p. 213).

We return to the idea that symbol means “to throw together” two parts or halves: one concerns the *intelligible*, the power of intelligence as the engine of ideas, decanted into an *aesthetic idea*; the other is rooted in the sensible, in the physicality of the forms that are presented, configuring the body of the work. It follows that, in the symbol, aesthetic ideas merge, or become embodied, or are *exposed* in the sensibility of the physical forms of the work. This coupling takes place at the *limit*, because this is where the Ideas of reason open up to *frontier reason*: they are therefore very special ideas, fronting on the limit of what can be known. The philosopher calls them *limit ideas*: “These limit Ideas, situated at the limit, are so in relation to the great enigmas, or aporias, of frontier reason: man and his freedom, the world and its determination, the enigma of the ultimate meaning, or of the ‘maximum value’, relating to the principle of man and the world. Ultimately, all questions lead to the question of what we are (what is man? as Kant knew how to understand)” (p. 214).

It becomes all too clear that, in this *philosophy of the limit*, the limit ideas are fundamental for the work to be considered truly artistic; otherwise it will be an object with merely decorative functions, and therefore superficial, with no real intellectual breath. Perhaps it’s even an object without a message (worthy of the name), or one that only manages to unleash that kind of commonplace ideas revolving around innocuous and circumstantial themes in vogue: in other words, without a voice, which may even arouse pleasure or enjoyment. But the same can’t be said for emotion: on the contrary, it can be emotionless. And if there is no emotion in the act of perception, if we intuitively have no emotional sensations, it’s because the work doesn’t fulfil the conditions required by the artistic factor.

As Eugenio Trías finally proposes: “These questions bark vibrantly, under indirect and analogical (by symbolic) forms in the truly artistic work; but these problem-ideas (as Kant called them) are always implanted in figures with radically sensitive forms, always singularised, always open to aisthesis. And in this openness they make possible, precisely in this symbolic intersection that takes place in the limes, an explosive junction of enjoyment, emotion and intellection that serves as a criterion for detecting and determining the appearance of the artistic work” (p. 214). We must emphasise the central importance of *the limit ideas or intellection, jouissance and emotion*. They truly constitute, according to the philosopher, that explosive trilogy that gives artisticity to a work so that it can access the status of a work of art.

This brings us to the end of this *aesthetic labyrinth*, travelling a complex and

thorny path, from stretch to stretch, slowly, as required by the intricate evolution of the thought of the author of the *philosophy of the limit*. In 1995, the Spanish philosopher was awarded the F. Nietzsche career award, the philosophy equivalent of the Nobel Prize. There is no need to invoke other arguments to size up the creative legacy of this true giant of contemporary philosophy. So, there's little more to say on the subject that has been proposed to us. Given the scope of the *philosophy of the limit*, it presents itself as a bottomless pit that can be explored continuously, descending further and further in a journey that seems to be infinite, no matter how far down you go. Within this well, another mine opens up, that of Aesthetics, with labyrinthine, shifting and dark contours, as we have seen. Where the answers, given their aporetic nature, allow for nothing but new questions. Which appear disguised even when the words seem to be more assertive.

So, it's worth asking one more question: can there really be no limits to art in contemporary aesthetics? Is the phrase "everything is relative" the confirmation of this impossibility? Is it not up to art to seek beauty to infinity? Is it enough for the artist to say "this is art" for it to be art? If so, what isn't art? Or does any object displayed in a museum acquire the status of a work of art? Is aesthetics an absolute end? Or is it a means to a certain end? And what role will ethics play in the formulation of aesthetics? Or can this relationship never exist?

If we think of the limit only as *terminus*, end, final, we think that this limit shouldn't exist. Likewise, if the limit is understood only as *limen*, threshold, sill, place of open passage to the beyond, we also understand that it should not exist. And the reason for this is simple: because, in the *philosophy of the limit*, when it is understood as *limes*, it always fulfils both functions at the same time; it must be both end and beginning. In the same way, ethics implies the defence of actions with a human face, those that distinguish themselves from inhuman practices that violate all limits. But, as has already been said, when deciding on actions, the *inhuman* must be present if there is to be freedom of choice. There must always be a frontier fight between the human and the inhuman. Always. And in order to get due measure, the inhuman must not be open or given free passage, but the sinister, as the "limit of beauty", can appear in disguise, in a veiled, indirect, symbolised way. Because if it is literally denied, we are also denying its aesthetic presence.

It is perceptible that the key hangs on the side of ethics. According to the philosophy of the limit. But there are aesthetic movements based on "total freedom for art". Therefore, there are no facilities in the field of aesthetics. And life, despite the magnificent gift of being able to face it by living. We live under the impulses of a nihilism that seems to be undermining the West in particular. The power of reason, pushed to its limits, denies everything that it cannot justify; on the contrary, by opening itself up to all kinds of excesses, it ends up justifying everything because "everything is relative", even deifying itself on the splendid throne of techno-science.

It allows us to dream and create utopias, or to feel compassion for others: without ever accepting war as truth, or rejecting the power to decide on the lives of others in the name of some covenant. Could it be that there is an existential void in a world without values, amoral, without truth of any kind, and that we seem to be living in a moment of celebration or apotheosis of the inhuman? Culturally and socially politicised? You'd better think not. That would be too radical. And painful, because it would confirm that we are not radically unique: as the *frontier beings* we are, we are

constantly recreating ourselves, facing something that transcends us. So, art may have no limits within the *human*, but the inhuman must be kept at a distance to ensure the criterion of freedom and this is fundamental.

The message (in the limit-ideas) should be conveyed through in *symbolic forms, indirectly and analogically*, never expressed directly and logically, as happens in allegory. Art will always be a symbolic dialogue with the sacred, operated at the limit. And the silence of the ethical will be there, voiceless, in that kind of silence that is felt even when polyphony is deafened. Let's hope that the sinister nuclear death never happens, as Rafael Argullol masterfully questions in *El Fin del Mundo como Obra de Arte* (1991). Never.

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