

Thresholds of Heroism

Abstract

With instruments typical of philosophy such as the analysis of concepts –here mainly related to space, time and movement–, the formulation of hypotheses and the construction of arguments, this work seeks to analyze from a metaphysical point of view, some of the consequences that could have, for a fisherman, the fact of becoming a fish farmer. The problem is of crucial importance for coastal areas such as the southern Gulf of Mexico and specially the port of Sisal, in which there are recently conditions for fishermen to train in the culture of octopus, snook and shrimp. The numerous contrasts between fishing and fish farming when viewed in terms of personal and social identity, the point at priorities that go far beyond survival and sketch what we could call, after Gaston Bachelard, thresholds of heroism.

Keywords: symbol, limits, land leg, sea leg, patience, pride, heroism, identity, sisal, yucatán

Introduction

There are numerous testimonies of the importance of the marine fauna for the Mayans of the Yucatan Peninsula; a number of them predate the Spanish arrival to its coasts. Fishing weights, hooks, decorative shells and paintings on ceramics¹ constitute strong evidence that several types of art fishing existed. These types of art, in turn, had more than one purpose: subsistence and trade, of course, but also and in some cases more importantly ceremonial, aesthetic and even political ends. For example, we know that the ancient Mayans made snail trumpets “to emit signals, in their dances and in war” and “tambours made with the shell of the turtle”² Fish, mollusks, turtles and shrimp were plentiful and were of such quality that the fact is mentioned in the first Spanish testimonies of the colonial era: “The fish they kill (on this coast) are very good and very fat ..Smooth; trout, neither more nor less in the color and freckles and flavor and no more fat and tasty to eat (...) there are very good octopus on the coast of Campeche (...) they kill some very large fish that look like blankets”³

This abundance, which contrasted with the scarcity of precious metals, is unfortunately a thing of the past. Today, the launching of nets or the “drifting of boats and caches”⁴ no longer seem sufficient to satisfy the needs of those who usually dedicate themselves to it. The fisherman from the Yucate can coast experiences difficulties to continue living from what the sea gives to him. However, there is another option: to raise shrimp, octopus and snooks instead of picking them up and caring for a pond *instead*⁵ of going to the sea.⁶ After

¹See plates in Alcalá, 1985, pp. 11 and 13. For prehispanic ceramics that represent fish, see the photographs of Justin Kerr in his Maya v Database. <http://www.famsi.org>

²Alcalá, op. Cit., P. 12

³Fray Diego de Landa, 1984, pp. 134-136. The testimony also evidences the variety of capture techniques.

⁴This is the method of capture of the octopus used in Yucatan. It consists of tying numerous twine rods of cane called “jimbas” that measure between six and nine meters from which bait hangs. A quarter of a century ago, these canes were used to protect the sugarcane plantations from the wind; for 10 years they fell into disuse because of the arrival of the sugar mill, until they were used to fish the octopus. According to experts, the fishing of octopus with jimbas is more ecological than other techniques, mainly African, because they do not drag the seabed. See Chac Bacab, 2005.

⁵Or “instead of”? The difference is, of course, of great importance.

⁶There is not, as far as I know, a precise agreement on the neologism: aquifer or aquaculture is a more inclusive term than fish farming because it avoids referring to a precise type of aquatic beings, and thus more naturally includes the rearing of octopus and shrimp, while fish farming unequivocally refers to

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several years of pioneering research work in the Yucatan peninsula, specialists from different horizons concluded that, given the current scarcity of marine resources, it was necessary that at least part of the fishing population of southeastern Mexico engage in fish farming. The implications of such a change and the reasons why this might well amount to a metamorphosis, is the subject of the present text. The part of the Yucatan coast to which reference will be made is the port of Santa María de Sisal,⁷ a village of about two thousand souls, with an active population of around a thousand people, a third of these being female. There are good conditions for the fishermen to train in the practice of aquaculture and obtain from this type of training an economic benefit susceptible if not to replace, at least complement their usual profits. Indeed, there is in Sisal a whole team of scientists who do not only study the local marine fauna, but also have the will to multiply the opportunities for the local population by making new cultivation technologies available to them.¹⁻⁷

In the case of the human sciences, there are several disciplines from which one can look at the consequences for a human being engaging in such a change of activity. Physical and social anthropologists, economists, specialists in ecology, ethnologists, historians, psychologists and sociologists will be able to test their methods to answer the following questions: is it possible for a fisherman to become a fish farmer using new technologies? What would be the implications of this transformation? What follows is an analysis of these questions in the light of philosophy, that is, of a discipline that

vertebrates. In the following, I will use any of the three terms.

⁷The port of Sisal is located at 0900150 of latitude and 21.0955 of longitude, on the northwestern coast of the state of Yucatan. The population count is based on the INEGI (2010). The importance of the port of Sisal as a seaport for entry and exit of people and goods, both national and international, throughout the colonial period and part of the nineteenth century probably explains that the mentions of it to be found in the colonial texts only focus on the strategic importance of this place, and its crucial access to Merida by land. This justified the construction of a “road that in the time of Doctor Quixada, who here was the Maire, did at the expense of His Majesty, where carts pass with what comes from Spain and Mexico, because there is the port of Cizal (Sisal) where all the ships come (“ Relation of Cacalchén, Yaxá and Sihunchén ”in *Historical-Geographic Relations of the Government of Yucatan*, volume 1, De la Garza, et al., Eds., P.341 See also” Relationship of Oxkutzcab “(*op.cit.*, P.357), where, speaking of the City of Campeche, it is said that” Nine leagues from this city to the west is a place (already) that is said Zizal (Sisal), where they come to unload the *mercaderias* for this city, but because of the northern winds, they do not dare to be in all the sea.”In page 37 of the *Codex of Calkini*, Sisal is mentioned like a port of sea located in the confines of the territory of Campeche described there.

works fundamentally with concepts and arguments, rather than with surveys, statistics and diverse measurements. Nonetheless there is more than one way a student of philosophy can look at such a vast problem. Hence the convenience of small *excursus* on the matter which includes a brief description of the steps taken into carries out this investigation.

Methodological considerations

The possibility that the fishermen of Sisal have of transforming themselves into fish farmers is the result of the work of marine biologists who, based on research on local soils, waters, fauna and flora, have also developed techniques for the practice of fish farming. A possible first angle for a philosophical view would be offered by the philosophy of science. We could, from this point of view, propose, for example, to analyze the tools used by biologists to produce their knowledge and the relationship they have with the development of new technologies. This field is vast enough to include the study of the impact of science and technology on society. This in turn is likely to stimulate the philosopher interested in political and economical insights. We could also choose another light through which to analyze the problem in question and worry about the ethical implications of the development of science and technology when they are applied in a specific context. If we adopt this angle, we could ask ourselves, for example, whether the fact of imprisoning an octopus in a small and closed pond to study the mechanisms of its respiration or the nature of its sensations is justifiable from an ethical point of view and we could ask a similar question with regard to what it implies to invite a human being to modify radically his way of subsistence. Although the present theoretical experiment is fundamentally related to the impact that the biologist's task has on the destiny of living beings, in this case of the Sisaleño fishermen and their community, this is not, strictly speaking, ethics. Rather, it offers a reflection exercise through which it is intended to show how some of the consequences that could have the introduction of the practice of aquaculture in a community of fishermen can be outlined from the analysis of some concepts that I dare to declare universal (in the sense of its relevance to describe part of the experience of all human beings without exception, because everyone becomes human by living them). The fact that a community or an individual lives these dimensions in one way or another, or does or does not use certain words to refer to them, does not take away said universality. By choosing human dimensions valid for all cultures or capable of transcending the particularities of one or another of them, I do not intend to argue against the cultural relativism that reigns in the present, but evidently this is not part of my premises. Therefore, the results of these considerations speak more of the fisherman in general than the fisherman of the port of Sisal in particular. However, there are also elements of judgment that qualify the emphasis on the universal and offer clues to refine the analysis and adjust it more precisely to the reality of the Sisaleña. Interestingly enough though, as suggested at the end of the paper, metaphysical considerations when viewed with detail, effortlessly invite to a precise way of starting ethical as well as aesthetic further investigations.

The very general concepts to which I refer are at least as old as the dawn of Western philosophy.⁸ They are the limit and lack of

⁸Around the beginning of the fifth century a. C. Anaximander, a philosopher of the city of Miletus, proposed as one of the key concepts of his philosophy something called *apeiron* (a notion whose interpretation continues to provoke debates, and whose meaning oscillates between "what has no limits" or "that whose limits one does not reach to perceive"). The notion of limit is fundamental to understand the anthropology and metaphysics of Plato, and especially that of the late Plato.

limit, the inside and the outside, the verticality and, finally, the time lived. All of them belong to three semantic fields: movement, time and space.⁹ From a brief analysis of these concepts some hypotheses are formulated with respect to the condition of the fisherman. These hypotheses propose contrasting the activity of the fisherman with that of the aqua culturist and there are at least five: the fisherman coexists more with the unlimited than with the limited, the fisherman comes and goes between two elements, handles two types of verticality, is more linked to the instant than any other duration and, for this reason, he has patience concentrated and sporadically exercised. Later on and based on these hypotheses, some of the possible implications of the transformation of a fisherman into an aqua culturist will be articulated; all of which are likely to generate repercussions on what constitutes the identity of a human being. While there is some conjecture as to which members of the Sisal community are more likely to welcome aquaculture and these are not the fishermen themselves, the observations that follow the analysis of the concepts mentioned above do not reach a decisive conclusion regarding the feasibility of the metamorphosis of a fisherman into a fish farmer. Hence, we return to the previous analyzes by synthesizing them around a notion distinct from the trade and gender, but that in a way are derived from the notion of verticality as well as unlimitedness: the threshold of heroism, a notion that returns the speech to a higher level of generality as every grown human being has at least a threshold of heroism in which he stands erect.⁸⁻¹⁰

The text also includes considerations of linguistic order. Finally, I would not like the mention of a conversation with a fisherman to induce errors: no surveys of any kind have been conducted and this work is not the result of an accumulation and systematization of empirical data. The question of course is disputable: is the present work a simple "Thought experiment" as some scholars call it? Perhaps not completely, but observation and dialogue were only used to qualify, clarify or enrich some of the statements that appear in the text. I am therefore insisting in the absence of what other disciplines call participatory research, interviews and specific ways of collecting and analyzing information. I should also specify, this time from an ontological point of view, that my proposal emphasizes not the nature of things in them but what they represent for a human being, that is, in the associations they evoke and in their symbolic content. To cite a single example, water is presented as a symbol rather than as a "thing" capable of being known chemically or biologically. It is here not so much what *is* seawater as what it *represents* for the fisherman.¹⁰

The limited and the unlimited

The human being is formed within a circumscribed space, from which he leaves to a world whose limits he does not get to perceive. Within this infinitely or indefinitely large world, such human being has (spatially, temporally and psychologically) experiences of the limited and others of the unlimited. These can alternate with respect to the same object: for example, a farmer who works in his piece of land or *milpa* can, standing in it, perceive the surrounding fields as unlimited and his, as small; but he can also see his own *milpa* as a space that, precisely because of its clear delimitation and depending on his own efforts, gives him sensations of extension and succession extraordinarily vivid. Alternation does not always happen. Sometimes both experiences may occur simultaneously: a swimmer who enters the sea can combine the perception of smallness with that of vastness.

⁹There are, of course, multiple connections between these semantic fields.

¹⁰See *eau* and *poisson* in *Dictionnaire des symboles*, pp. 374-382 and 773-775, respectively.

In principle, it seems possible to oppose the boundaries of a *milpa*, or a house, with the lack of limits of the sea. The fisherman is someone who leaves a finite space (his house) to get on a boat that moves him away from these limits and into something whose borders are not always perceptible. We can qualify these statements in the case of the Yucatan Peninsula. And it is that in cold lands the house constitutes a perfectly circumscribed and fundamentally closed space. This is not so in lands with tropical weather where doors and windows usually remain open¹¹ and where the notion of limit becomes more patent in terms of contrast between sunlight and shade. Rather than a circumscribed space, the house of a *sisaleño*, by day, is a refreshing penumbra, a protective shadow, a half-open place where the pupil of the eye can finally afford to expand. In turn, the boundaries blurred by the contrast between sun and shade are partly mobile: at different times of the day, the shaded area successively includes or excludes patios, backyards and sidewalks, creating outside the houses shaded and shifting spaces in which it is comfortable to stay for a while.¹²

Perhaps something of what is mentioned here in terms of contrast between light and shade is valid for any place in the Yucatan peninsula, only in the port of Sisal reigns a conjunction of heat and light similar to that of the desert climate where, at certain times of the day, the first is intense and the second, absolutely dazzling. Therefore, the contrast between light and shadow has a very peculiar connotation. That said and as much as it is necessary to clarify in the Yucatecan case the vision of the house as a closed enclosure, this remains contrastable with the opening of the marine space, which both towards the horizon and towards the funds creates, if not a feeling of infinity, at least one of lack of precise limits. To enter the sea with a fisherman's boat is to move away from the mainland to penetrate an immensity flooded with light and motion. And in the case of the Gulf of Mexico, we also have reservations: a gulf not always assimilates with an open sea. Here, putting the boat to the sea does not necessarily imply intersecting or crossing a frothy horizontality formed by the last of the waves. The access of a boat to the waters of this gulf, in summer especially, seems more natural, as if it were to enter a huge pond, or a big bath.¹³ When there is no northern wind, the sea of the gulf seems more susceptible to contain than to move away forever. In winter, on the other hand, go out "in front of the open sea, counting the seven or nine waves that allow you to make your way"¹⁴ can be not only risky but even impossible. All in all, the sea remains the sea and the size of this gulf certainly speaks to its fundamentally open and immeasurable space. Stop going out to sea, it amounts to being confined to the earth. And taking care of a pond full of octopus that reproduces, instead of going to calibrate ropes and hooks according to the depth where the octopod is, is to stay, if not at home, near it. Both activities do not seem substitutable without some change of identity in the fisherman, nor, as we will see, do they seem comparable in terms of satisfaction.¹¹⁻¹⁴

¹¹This statement should be qualified in the parts of the Gulf coast that are usually hit by "*nortes*" (Northern winds). In these areas, there is alternation between closed house (when the Northern winds turn up) and open or semi-open house. See Alcalá, 1985, p. 89.

¹²As Maria Noel Lapoujade observes, this notion of a mobile limit, here in an imaginary record, is also applicable to the marine horizon that the same waters seem to set in motion.

¹³We must also qualify here. In the *historical-geographical relations of the Yucatan Governorate*, it is mentioned that Cizal is "a port that has no qualms whatsoever, because it is a beach and is discovered to the north, which is the cause of giving many ships with this time on the coast and getting lost." See the cited work, 1983, p. 83

¹⁴See Gatti, 1986, p. 17

The outside and the inside

The circumscribed space from which the human being goes out into the world can be called "interiors", no matter if the inside refers to the womb, the house, the room, the corner, or the village. Throughout the years that a human life lasts, inland, the distinction usually persists. One goes from the factory or from the school to the house, from the cubicle to the apartment, from the theater to the restaurant and so on. One and other dwellings remain comparable in many parameters: the light can go in both, the atmosphere there may or may not be breathable, the entrance door may not close properly, and the setting will be more or less exposed to unwanted intrusions. Unless it is walking or cycling, transportation, whether by land or air, does not fundamentally alter these dimensions. In this way, going back and forth between one dwelling and another also has the air of a home, with the possibility of feeling either at ease, whether suffocated, whether insensitive, but always inside, with possibilities of leaving and *vice versa*.

This could well be the case, *mutatis mutandis*, of a whaler, of a regatta or of a ship designed for cruises, but not like that of the fisherman's boat. The coastal fisherman's boat is skiff by definition.¹⁵ There, the demarcation between outside and inside is tenuous and is more related to the foot or the knee keeping the head between sky and water than with the clear sensation of entering or leaving. The boat is not a ship. What surrounds the fishermen is more the element and sunlight than the skiff itself. And even so, there are also different ways of feeling one with this skiff and also many ways of feeling safe or about to be in danger. To the feelings of fragility are joined those of strength. The fisherman has the wonderful freedom to enter the sea and to leave it. And when he leaves, with or without fish, he enters the mainland and returns, in a strong sense. Leave one element to enter another, exchange one way of being for another, one way to stand in the world for another.

Verticalities

One of the ways of being human, indeed, is to update one's bipedal creature potentiality. Of our first conquest of verticality we do not usually remember. One day, after multiple attempts, with work and tremor, with the help of other hands or artifacts that surround us, we raise our heads and explore the firm ground from a fragile first pedestal balance generally celebrated by those who witness it. This eventually strengthens and becomes both a source of differentiation (the functions of the feet are separated from those of the hands, for example) as a correlative distinction. By becoming a fisherman like his father, the son has to conquer a second type of verticality, which consists of keeping the balance standing on a moving surface. The fisherman is the biped able to remain upright even though his feet tread a moving surface (his boat), which in turn rests on a surface that is also volume. The dynamism of this is not always predictable and is also capable of opening to sink and destroy structures produced by humans (boats and fishermen, among others). The fisherman is the being that every day walks towards the seashore (first sense of verticality) to then climb into a small space and from there, to a certain point, "pierce a reality"¹⁶ on which he will be kept in balance

¹⁵What is said here only applies to boats. Probably it is appropriate to clarify these statements in the case of the boats of the Yucatecan major fleet that also serve to fish and are used to move further from the coast.

¹⁶I take the expression of Gaston Bachelard, who writes in *Water and Dreams*: "It is necessary to make the psychological story of a proud victory accomplished over an adverse element to find the vital, nervous, real sense of

by another type of posture and muscular tensions, another succession of movements, another completely different way of standing in the world (second sense of verticality): "... a fisherman always stands with his legs slightly open, but one foot ahead of the other, not with the two in the same plane.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ This is the custom they have acquired from standing on the boat to control movements in the longitudinal direction and a little open to maintain the transverse balance."¹⁷

Now, the verticality of the fisherman is a conquest that is never reached once and for all. It is a verticality constantly haunted by the element, dangerous because sea water is susceptible to sudden violence. Therefore, it is very likely that this verticality cannot stop being, again and again, a reason for satisfaction because it is an achievement. "No walk" on the mainland "has this threshold of heroism."¹⁸ I do not know if the fisherman's son necessarily remembers the day when, in the presence of an adult in his community,¹⁹ he could, seaward, stand in the skiff and start in the handling of everything that serves to fish, including the boat itself. Many children even begin their learning not in the sea but in rivers, estuaries and *cenotes*. Ivan Ek, fisherman of Sisal, does not keep a precise memory of the conquest of his second verticality, but recalls, at the age of six, his failed attempt to stay upright in his father's boat and his subsequent fall, which at that time seemed to be something similar to the effects of drunkenness. This initiation, more dangerous than the first, is more likely to be remembered by those who acquire it. It is undoubtedly another type of verticality, clearly distinguishable from the first.²⁰ To stop being a fisherman is to abandon the most spectacular verticality of the two, which distinguishes him from other mortal bipeds.²¹

Time and patience

Time, in terrestrial terms, is often a matter of succession, a matter of lines or circles. Lines, being a young that gradually ages, being born and dying in some cosmologies; circles, the falling asleep and the awakening, the succession between work and rest, being born and dying in cosmologies different from the first ones. In both cases, there is a before and an after that surrounds, more or less clearly, the moment or moments when you are born or die, you fall asleep or you wake up, or when you start or stop thinking about something. To these successions are added the seasons, the schedules and the cycles of life. And there are also, for the human being, corresponding forms of waiting, hope and despair. The fisherman not only depends

objective notions. Pride is the one that gives the vital impulse its rectilinear trajectories, that is, its absolute success. The feeling of secure victory is that which gives the reflection its date, the sovereign joy, the virile joy of *piercing reality*" (p.240). The italics are mine.

¹⁷Gatti, *op. cit.* p. 15. This quotation follows a precious passage describing the fisherman's peculiar way of gazing.

¹⁸Bachelard, *op. cit.*, p.245

¹⁹During the first trips of apprentice children in the art of fishing (in ships large enough to hold eight to ten crew members), they are the ones who work for 'pachochero' / Yucatán, or 'nevero' (Gulf), that is, those who put the fish between layers of ice. They are never initiated by their father but by "some uncle or compadre (...) almost clandestinely (...) almost kidnapped from the eyes of the mother". See Gatti. *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59.

²⁰My friend Michael Gordon pointed out to me that the verticality required for the sailboat is different from that required by the fisherman's boat. Both "marine" and "terrestrial" verticality could then branch out according to the type of activity, support and terrain.

²¹I have put the accent on the difference between both types of verticality, but it is also possible to bring them closer: Carlos Rosas thinks that for the fisherman, his boat constitutes an extension of the mainland. This could partially explain why most fishermen are good occasional divers but lousy swimmers.

on the alternation between the fishing periods and the closed seasons. Fundamentally, his fishing calendar combines weather, which he is often able to foresee, with the time of migration of marine fauna. To become a fisherman is to be able to perform an extraordinary combination of observations that includes, among other things, "the color of the sea, its bristling and the presence of fish or birds related to other species that are sought".²² However, the patience and impatience required to fish and to grow fish, respectively, are radically different. The former compress the waiting time, the latter delay it. Consumption and profit are almost immediate in the first case, but never in the second case. The fisherman, as hunter-gatherer, catches his prey in a lapse of time that goes from five hours to fifteen days. The fishing process starts with a free fish or with a mollusk, captive for a little while and then soon dead. The process of fish farming, on the other hand, is much more akin to that of agriculture. It starts with a fish caught or born in captivity and whose life has to be prolonged through a long-lasting breeding and with a view to a reproduction period. The free animal that is caught and then killed is the same fish throughout the process; the captive, on the other hand, is something different from free fish because it is a domesticated creature. Its life develops within limits established by human beings. Once in the pond, it has somewhere to stay but nowhere to go. And this stay is governed by those who guard it and, more often than not, orchestrate its different stages. Fish farmers in turn need patience more similar to that of the farmer than the fisherman. Encouraged on a fenced space, they make gestures whose desired effects are only achieved in the long term. They get to know the animal, to have a precise notion of its history and if their captives are dead one morning they will have some memory of what they were yesterday. The fisherman surprises his prey and interrupts the course of his life: he catches it, he sees it agonize. This brutal intrusion is not a spectacle nor coexistence but an instantaneous impact between two living bodies, an intersection between the axis of forces of a predator and that of its victim.²³ To this fundamental difference is added another, correlative and we could call it 'responsibility'. The fisherman's office can never be completely disconnected from a certain notion of providence, heaven's gift, luck or miracle; the return with good fishing is not only related to the competence of who is able to interpret the nuances of the water colors, the movements of its surface or those that come from the bottom of the sea. There is always in the good news of a good fishing something like the coloring of luck or victory, that of a miracle or that of benevolence, whether divine or not. The fisherman can rarely feel totally the cause of what happens to him. Not so the aqua culturist, who is responsible for a production process and referee, to a large extent at least, what happened in their ponds. He has elements to forecast his luck, he knows that if he does not give he does not receive and he is responsible day after day for the success of his management.

(FE)Male

Therefore, aquaculture has, in turn, more resemblance to activities traditionally reserved for women than with this predominantly male activity called "fishing". Prepare and give food with certain frequencies, see grow day after day, detect signs of weakness and seek remedy, multiply preventive care, etc., all this is still the daily bread

²²See Gatti, *op. c. it.*, pp. 16-17

²³The description of the fisherman as a predator or hunter must of course be qualified according to the type of fishing practiced in this or that place. On the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico fishing is sometimes practiced with large nets tied at some points along the coast, a practice that is more reminiscent of gathering than of hunting.

of most housewives. In contrast, the fisherman who lets a crab-shaped bait fall into the water to attract an octopus does not nourish his future prey but only communicates, for a moment, the illusion of doing so. The result sought here is not life but death. If the above makes sense, it is simpler to transform a farmer into a fish farmer and perhaps, in turn, this last job is more adaptable, *prima facie*, to women than to men.²⁴ The collection is little related to this most immanent dimension of everyday life. The woman, in these contexts, often sees coming to her, “look” (s)” at the sea from home”.²⁵ And her movements, perhaps as numerous and as varied as those of the fisherman with whom she sleeps, are nevertheless infinitely more circumscribed in terms of space and are subject to a routine schedule. The fisherman, as we saw, works with more spatial dimensions. His absence implies relative remoteness and always has a partially unpredictable aura: there may be bad time to fish, it may be spoiled, the boat may fail, the fish reluctant to cause havoc or setbacks. And in turn, these factors can put the fisherman’s life at risk. It is easier to talk about victory and trophy in this case than in the one who nourishes and observes the result of one’s efforts. The human gatherer is less confined than the one dedicated to the care of one’s home.

Between these two extremes are aquaculture and agriculture, intermediate strangers where the outside and the inside are combined in a peculiar way, the fence with the horizon and the gift of life with the control of it. Twinned in appearance with the collection and domestic chores, respectively, aquaculture and agriculture are in fact more related to each other and are in turn more linked to work at home. The fisherman, like a predator or a collector, takes. The farmer and the housewife process and raise, sow and wait and if something is sold, they often do so after a production process. Now, the above does not mean that what we have called ‘metamorphosis’ is impossible. On the one hand, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are fundamentally biological categories and apparatus of customs, traditions, prejudices or power structures that associate sex with a certain type of active life does not have to be immovable. Perhaps it would be a question of changing habits, which is perhaps difficult for old people but perhaps more feasible for new generations as well as for individuals of any age who are particularly daring, creative or even indifferent to one or another tradition. But we should not lose sight of the peculiar strength of these habits: very few habits constitute a *base* of the social organization of human communities and the sexual division of work is one of them.^{20–26}

On the other hand, talk of identity for a fisherman does not imply something like a fixed essence. Rather, if it is impossible to see a human life as something not circumscribed by various notions of limits, it is also difficult to imagine a human life that does not go, from time to time, beyond these limits. Many times it is the need for survival that reveals that human capacity for transgression, forcing human beings to adapt to new circumstances. The same fishermen from the Yucatecan coast testify to this ability to adapt. They may have lived off the Sisal culture and now have become fishermen, or they continue combining agricultural activities with fishing activities, alternating them according to the season. The same individual, in fact, can combine the salt harvest (from March to June) with the sowing of the *milpa* (May or June) and the fishing of the grouper and the octopus (from May to November and from August to November

respectively).²⁶ Sometimes, the change of circumstances forces certain human groups to return to more frugal ways of life. We know, for example, that part of the New Zealand Maoris left their home island to escape the domination of their brothers. They populated the island of Chatman, whose soil did not allow the development of any agriculture and therefore became what had been their ancestors: collectors.²⁷ It is an example among others of the amazing power of the human being to deal with the limits and to overcome, imagination through, the “realm of facts”.²⁸

Now, there is no reason to suppose that marine biologists are wrong in proposing aquaculture as a desirable life option for the inhabitants of Sisal. Perhaps, plain and simple, there comes a time when this possibility is imposed on part of the community. Also, remember that the fisherman does not normally fish at any time of the year,²⁹ and many times has had or has other functions. In principle, then, possibly a fisherman for octopus could be dedicated to fish farming during the off seasons and then entrust it to his wife or to one of his children at the start of fishing season. Even part of the amazing empirical knowledge of fishermen, transmitted orally from generation to generation (the forecast of recurrent events such as rain and the knowledge of its effects, the intelligence of the change of currents, the significance of the coloration or the movement of the waters, etc.), is still useful to a farmer. The mention of fishermen who are also, at times, farmers, may make the reader suspect that the transformation of those into fish farmers is not a process of change as radical as I have suggested so far. If aquaculture has an affinity with agriculture and indeed, many farmers have already shown their ability to become fisherman, perhaps they could accept much more easily even the practice of fish farming. However, I suspect that being both fisher and farmer is not exactly the same as combining fishing with aquaculture. In this last case, this is about living something like a double life in the bosom of what is, apparently, a little the same, without being so at all. In other words, the individual who would combine fishing with fish farming would be in the last case still close to the sea water, the fish, the octopus, the shrimp, etc.. But aquaculture would set him subtly outside of many of the parameters analyzed here (time, limit, etc.) and capable of granting him a specific identity. What at first does not seem to be entirely different in terms of activity, is different in a profound way in each of its implications. In this case, the change has a more subversive character and we will return to it in a moment.

The options are still open. Perhaps the most feasible is that the fisherman includes in his activities a collection dedicated to the practice of aquaculture and thus contributes to its development without practicing it properly. While it is possible that many old fishermen refuse to accept such a change, perhaps some of their sons and daughters will come to aquaculture, learn that a fish can also be known and loved on dry land and how sometimes they can be both object of study and trade. Maybe these future adults will get a degree in sustainable management of coastal areas and practice fishing more

²⁶See Chenaut, pp. 29-30, from where the information about the calendars was extracted.

²⁷See Diamond, Jared, *Guns, Germs and Steel. The Fates of Human Societies*, 1999, pp. 53-54. Jared draws attention to the fact that when changing island and way of subsisting, they also changed their name to call themselves not 'maori' but 'moriori'.

²⁸The expression is from Bachelard. See *La poétique de l'espace*, 1994, p.5. We shall return to the possible significance of those changes of habitat and name (*apud* the previous note), in the case of Maori, and the importance of being able to go beyond the 'realm of facts' (see *infra*, p. 10).

²⁹Thus, the octopus fishing season that begins in August concludes on December 15.

²⁴Talking about adaptability in the case of women does not mean that they are more apt than men to practice fish farming; it only means, if I am right, that they would be quicker to accept to practice it.

²⁵*Notebooks of environmental disclosure. Coasts and seas of Mexico. Integrated management with love. SEMARNAT, Mexico, 2016, p.51*

in the form of a sport than as a way of life. This does not prevent the blood of a fisher's son or grandson from running in his veins. For all the above, however, the Sisaleña woman seems more apt to accept the practice of aquaculture, before her brother, concubine, or husband. This practice, which as has been said has greater affinity with agriculture, is also in more than one sense related to domesticated spaces such as coastal lagoons, estuaries and swamps in which women and children already use to fish without exposing themselves to the risks involved in going out to sea. Besides all those concessions regarding the possibility for a fisher to become fish farmer, perhaps his present reluctance to do so hints at a fundamental dimension present behind it and this is what we have been mentioning already when we dealt with verticality: this is his way to stand in the world, his own threshold of heroism.

Threshold of heroism

Let's return to some of the considerations related to the very general concepts proposed at the beginning and try to emphasize the peculiarities of fishing: first of all, a man fishes in the sea. The sea does not belong to anyone; it is an immensity that is not, properly said, territory at all, at least not in the sense that private property is handled on the mainland. "The sea is the unknown, a hostile place, where the success of the activity is a matter - in the last instance - of luck. In it human life is in constant danger." The human being whose job takes him on the high seas riding a boat lives literally with death almost daily. To the luck that exists in finding a good quantity of fish and shellfish and capturing them, joins the one of returning alive home. It is not a challenge that the man himself seeks in order to feel alive but a latent danger that naturally runs when entering an unpredictable and dangerous element. This kind of task does not only require developing a literal way of standing on a certain surface area, that is another type of verticality related to a certain kind of equilibrium, but it also fosters a kind of solidarity among fishers. In the words of Graciela Alcalá by me translated, "Just as the use of fishing gear for collective use requires the cooperation of those involved in the fishing maneuver, the defenselessness of these people facing the sea forces them to help each other to return safely to port. [...] Mutual aid is not a simple moral abstraction of ideological origin, but a fundamental principle of survival that is developed by daily practice in the craft of artisanal fisherman." *Mutatis mutandis*, marine verticality cannot be reduced to a sort of feat in terms of equilibrium: it is a condition *sine qua non* not only of survival but also and above all perhaps of the freedom of movement required for the proper development of the complex fishing maneuver that requires control and coordination, as well as collaboration and mutual help. Ethics doubtlessly is lurking here, as a natural derivation from the need to survive as well as, we shall underline it in a moment, to be proud of doing so.

To ask a fisherman to become an aqua culturist is to ask him to change his identity and for him to accept it involves at least the following consequences: seeing his conception of time and space disrupted, seeing his record of verticalities reduced and having to adopt another sense of patience and also of pride and danger. To be in the earth but also in the intersection between sea and sky, near his old element without being in it, to have the eyelids less raised, the view shorter, the movements slower. It can be said that, in return, the fisherman transformed into a farmer will live better because he and his family will be more affluent economically, better nourished or educated and also healthier. But this aspect of the quality of life is a disconsolate widow if it does not go hand in hand with what allows a human being to want to get up in the morning and walk another day

of his life, to know what keeps him going upright, which gives him the feeling of being alive and being someone.³⁰ To ask a fisherman to live a change of this kind well is to suppose that he can develop an inclination for agriculture, change the launching of the net for the one of seeds and the joy of catching by the one coming from the slow emergence of the fruits. In a few words, it is supposing a lot. So as an example, if we go back to the Maoris jump from New Zealand to the island of Chatman,³¹ in my opinion it would be a mistake to reduce it to a survival defensive tactic. Negative before the possible submission was probably linked to what makes a human being to come up with a conception itself of what is or not a life worth living. It is a capacity inherent to human nature, itself limited to limits and yet irresistibly prone to transgress them.

The ambiguities of homonimia

The difference between the way of life of the fisherman and that of the farmer also has impacts, so to speak, linguistically. Probably in the eyes of a fisherman the fish of the pond is no longer a true fish and the octopus prisoner has ceased to be an octopus in any way. It may be that the same word continues to be used to designate these living beings in one condition or another, but the realities referred to are undoubtedly different. The same thing happens, *mutatis mutandis*, with the sea water carried to a pond, in contrast to the sea water still in its natural place. Sea water, once transferred, loses some of its natural and phenomenological properties and the result of the manipulation of its movement evokes more certain fresh water than its august origins. This issue is also important. Too often it is believed that the difficulty of transmitting a message is linked to the fact of not knowing a word; therefore, it is not known what it refers to or what it means. This could be the case of the word 'aquaculture', or of the name 'Academic Unit', translated by the inhabitants of Sisal with the word 'school'. But aquaculture and the development of new livelihood technologies also disrupt the very same notion of fish or seawater and therefore the significance of these words. When the electric power began to be used to transform the artifact called 'coffee mill' into an object infinitely more efficient in terms of grinding times (and also infinitely more dangerous for the integrity of the fingers that manipulate it), the same word continued to be used to refer to an object without more resemblance to its ancestor than that of the function. Ancestor and descendant continued to live together in the space of the same kitchen, under the same name. A similar juxtaposition is starting on the shores of the sea that bathes the port of Sisal. In fact at a distance of only a few meters, there are captive fish and free fish, sea water at ease and contained sea water and there are also men, women and children who hear about a possible future through which, in one way or another, their identity and their way of dreaming are very likely to be transformed.

Epilogue

The essential part of this text was written more than 10 years ago. In 2005 a group of Sisaleña women created a small cooperative to raise octopus,³² a fact that seems to corroborate one of the conclusions of this work. The reader will decide if this is the case. Does the value

³⁰Edward Sapir points out the importance of the satisfaction factor for the sense of belonging that an individual has with respect to a culture. See *Selected Writings*, 1985, pp. 321-331.

³¹See *supra*, p. 13

³²Another case of interest is the creation, in 2001, of a cooperative called *Mujeres Pescadoras del Mar* in San Felipe "which brings together 21 women who are mainly dedicated to providing bait for the octopus fishery". See Fraga *et al.* (2004), p. 8.

of a theoretical experiment such as this depend on further verification or falsification of empirical order? More fundamental may be the fact that the history of the port of Sisal continues to be written. The arrival of researchers from the UNAM to the Sisaleño coast - with new buildings, awnings and ponds that for some neighbors surely seemed to resemble a science fiction scenario - is far from being the first transformation of a place inhabited since the 16th century. It was the most important national and even international port of the whole peninsula; then declared a port of height and cabotage in 1810, maritime customs until 1871, a place of disembarkation not only of pirates and merchandise but also of such illustrious characters as the Empress Carlota and until recently a whereabouts considered by some of its inhabitants as 'left at the hand of God.' As for philosophy, one of the possible tasks would be to go in search of everything designated in this text as nuances (the peculiarity of the limits that occur in Sisal, the contrasts between light and shadow, the special conjunction of heat and of light, the differences between open sea and gulf, etc.) to construct, in a theoretical way, what could be called a poetics³³ of this precise type of space.³⁴ Such poetics should also contemplate the diversity of the landscapes of this part of the coast, as well as the vital functions they perform. This would be the aesthetical horizon. The peculiar relation of metaphysics with ethics mentioned above is also worth exploring. Furthermore, philosophy has recently developed a growing interest to rethink the concept of dignity that underlies what I have called here "heroism" with the purpose of returning it to a place it did not have or left having in the field of philosophy.³⁵

³³The expression is by Gaston Bachelard, present, although sometimes only between lines, throughout this text. Making use of the same conceptual instruments could, in the case of the region that occupies us, outline a poetic a little different from that of Bachelard, who after all remains a being of rivers and streams before that of the sea.

³⁴These reflections had as their origin an academic dialogue between marine biologists and anthropologists, which I attended for institutional reasons and as coordinator of the Mérida Unit, in August 2004, shortly after the Academic Unit of Social Sciences and Humanities of the UNAM (now CEPHCIS) and the Multidisciplinary Teaching and Research Unit of the Faculty of Sciences were able to open their doors in Mérida and Sisal, respectively. A first version of this work was published in 2006 in *Península* (see bibliography). When Coordinator of the Sisal Unit Carlos Rosas had patience to answer the questions I asked him, most of the time was *ex ignorantia*. He is not responsible for what has been said here, but perhaps for the fact that this reflection has flourished thanks to the numerous and pleasant conversations held on the subject. I have also taken great advantage of the generous comments that my colleague Martin Fricke offered in writing after having read the first version of the text. I assume, of course, the responsibility for the final result. In December 2005, part of this material was disseminated through videoconference before hearings of the Faculty of Sciences of the UNAM, and of the Florida International University of Miami (FIU). I thank Xavier Chiappa (UNAM) and Ligia Collado (UNAM-FIU) for the opportunity to communicate the first results of the experiment on that occasion. The present version, due to a kind invitation of Carmen Trueba to write on dignity is, with respect to the analysis of the key concepts, a sort of reissue, with the exception of a new analysis of what became the central concept, namely the threshold of heroism. For more than one reason, dealing with scholar as well as friendship, this text is dedicated to her. I suspect that Adrian Almazán is right in observing that such a nude ontology might be enriched by economical and political insights from philosophy itself, and I would be delighted to see him doing it so that we could continue talking about this. My thanks also go to one of the referee who insisted in questioning whether my experiment was or was not including empirical evidence. As I had already exhausted the patience of the editor of the present Journal, I could not acknowledge his other helpful observations as well as questions. Finally my warmest thanks to Jane Mallonee whose English saved the *corpus* of this paper from unintelligibility. Her familiarity with philosophy itself eased the way.

³⁵See the entry 'dignity' written by Gerardo de la Fuente in the *Dictionary*

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Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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on Justice edited by C. Pereda in 2017, 163-165, and as confirmation of the importance of this concept and for that of honor for political philosophy, Robert Oprisko, 113-129. There is an awful lot of work to do in order to explore such a concept. So far, if I am properly informed, the analysis does not go earlier than Roman times that are Cicero onwards. It might be worth having a look at Ancient Greek entrances like *axios*, *agathos* and *aischros*.

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