

Aesthetic-epistemological contradictions in the concept of water: A necessary reformulation for life

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The following paper highlights the contradictions that exist in the understanding of water: it is considered a marketable resource over which one can exert power and, at the same time, a common good used by the planet's species and ecosystems. Based on this, and after an analysis of several widespread ideas, the paper proceeds to describe the paradox in the perception of water as a product of an alienated aesthetics that makes it impossible to experience the after-effects of the Westernised world. This lack of perception will be called aesthetic omission, corresponding to Eaton's "nonperceivables" (2000). The text urges us to be aware that these kinds of aesthetics exclusions around water have global effects and ultimately determine the fate of life on Earth itself. Therefore, a complex revision of the established ontology of water is proposed in response.

Keywords: water; nonperceivables; aesthetics; epistemology; Earth

Introduction

The controversy around water appears to have very little to do with philosophical debates. However, the various ways of conceiving issues such as this, so widely valued throughout history, actually reveal ontoepistemic features that lead to a better understanding of the kind of relationships that human beings establish with and *in* the world. They also serve as a way to study the aesthetic implications of current approaches to the problem. Thus, the *story of water* reveals how people have positioned themselves not only in relation to this resource, but also in relation to the ways in which human beings conceive of the space in which they and water coexist. In order to better understand how such philosophical questions emerge from the debate on water, we must first elucidate the roots of this controversy.

To this end, this paper will explore the different ways in which the concept of water is understood, firstly, from the perspective of formal philosophy, big companies and institutions and, secondly, from a perspective rooted in common

sense, which remains somewhat alien to these discussions. We will see how, despite the existence of two well-differentiated major trends in academia and business life, which conceive of water either as a marketable resource or as a necessarily free common good, these two visions coexist and overlap people's minds in everyday life. If one thinks about what water *is*, two concepts automatically come to mind: on the one hand, water is a fundamental business for humanity, a commodity, and, on the other, an indispensable, natural good used to sustain the life of its ecosystems. This means that, on an epistemological level, human beings exhibit two ways of knowing water at the same time: as a space of control in which they have industrial and economic power over an essential resource for nourishing human life, and as an element of the planet itself, which belongs to no one. In other words, there is a fundamental division that results in water being perceived and defined from two opposing positions that nevertheless persist. This epistemological dichotomy reveals a profound aesthetic alienation that will be our object of analysis in this text. The sensibilities that are raised by this basic resource contradict each other and, in this way, a paradoxical aesthetic experience is born, putting any conscious reflection on the concept of water in jeopardy.

Thirdly, given this situation, the present text will propose new ways of appreciating and relating to the environment: an exercise in re-aestheticising dominant experiences in order to solve this paradox. Thus, new paths to understanding reality can begin to be designed, starting with the question of how to reformulate matters such as water. This question will be the subject of this paper, and even if no specific answers are articulated, possible approaches to confronting the problem will be elucidated.

The two epistemologies of water: monetised and non-monetised

It is worth clarifying the reason for speaking in terms of epistemology and not mere political positions, namely that the conceptions drawn up around the issue of water in fact depend on the way in which knowledge of the matter itself is constructed. Therefore, these positions all have a fundamentally epistemological component which, in turn, sheds light on the philosophical debates that began to emerge in the 20th century under the epistemological legacy of Modernity.

Firstly, some believe that, precisely because water is a basic good, it should be regulated through the market, raising its price in order to recognise its value to humankind. Among the defenders of this approach is Peter Brabeck, water ambassador for the United Nations and former CEO of the Nestlé group, who argues that although water is a human right, only 1.5% of it is used to cover the basic needs of the population. Thus, he claims that the remainder, once people's sustenance has been covered, should be commercialised at high prices in order to prevent large companies—such as those in the diesel or agro-food industries—from using it excessively (Brabeck, 2013). We are thus faced with a move to capitalise on water with a view to improving its management and distribution throughout the world, which, on the one hand, recognises the value of water as a fundamental resource for life and, on the other, affirms that it is for this very reason that it should be given an economic value. In fact, one of the principles of the 1992 Dublin Statement on managing

freshwater resources was: “Water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognized as an economic good” (United Nations, 2013: 63).

However, the problem with this epistemology—let us call it *monetised*—lies in the fact that a rise in the cost of water does not affect its use by large companies, which are willing to pay any amount. Nestlé is a good example of this, as shown in the documentary *Bottled Life: Nestle’s Business with Water* (Schnell, 2012). Instead, it contributes to the desertification of ecosystems and the deprivation of poor populations of clean, unpolluted water, leading to the spread of disease and even the death of thousands (Schnell, 2012). For instance, the various plantations for palm oil production that have been developed in Indonesia have destroyed forests and upstream water sources, and have polluted remaining water sources with fertilisers, leaving the local population without clean water and, in turn, increasing the consumption of bottled water (Bieler and Moore, 2023: 4). Even more striking, however, is the fact that water-borne diseases account for about 5% of all deaths worldwide, according to the United Nations Development Program (Jaffee, 2020: 303). In this kind of context, Marcatelli and Büscher speak of “liquid violence” to refer to water inequalities and the harmful impact that industries have on the most marginalised populations, destroying their ecosystems and making them believe that, if they cannot pay for water, they should be satisfied with polluted leftovers (2019: 765).

What we propose in view of these facts is that this epistemology, beyond serving the market, is also idealistic, as it advocates a fictitious reality that diametrically differs from what really happens. One could therefore speak of monetised hydric epistemology as a direct product of modern epistemological heritage, since one can clearly perceive how it establishes a fundamental division of reality into two, an idea that began to be developed in the Enlightenment. On the one hand, there is the space of the mind and cognitive articulations which corresponds to the world of market and economic transactions (*subject*) and, on the other, the physical and material world where water is found (*object*). Thus, this kind of approach to the question of water is justified by conceiving of the reality *outside* as one that can be mastered and manipulated, a premise that has dominated Western thought since Descartes or Hume. This premise also establishes the physical world as separate from the human mind, thus ensuring the objectification of the former and securing its absolute control by reason (Dreyfus and Taylor, 2016). Therefore, we could speak of this epistemology as fundamentally anthropocentric.

The result of all of this, moreover, is a series of sensibilities that are far removed from the very sensory perceptions that are specific to individuals; a kind of idealistic aesthetics that, beyond being driven by an appreciation of things, does so according to single ideas in isolation that are disseminated by market bulletins. Dewey already warned of this aesthetic danger triggered by metaphysical dualism when he argued that “we get the absurdity of an experiencing which experiences only itself, states and processes of consciousness, instead of the things of nature” (Dewey, 1929: 11). That is, monetised hydric epistemology gives rise to an aesthetic experience that is disengaged from experiencing the real world in order to develop sensibilities in accordance with preconceived ideas. In other words, amidst the very fabric that gives rise to the commodification of water there is also a certain kind of omission—or

ignorance—around the subject that causes sensibilities to be diverted to other aspects of the experience of water. For example: the healthfulness of drinking mineral water at the expense of the welfare of those harmed by the manufactures, which I will return to later. In the words of Tafalla: “Así es como funciona la destrucción: nuestra civilización comienza por hacernos ignorar ciertas cosas y luego puede destruirlas sin que nos demos cuenta” [This is how destruction works: our civilisation begins by making us ignore certain things, which it can then destroy without us realising it] (2019: 180). This is how the overexploitation of aquifers, communities and precarious ecosystems is perpetuated, turning them into a hidden problem, which is given little importance due to a generalised lack of awareness of these impacts.

Secondly, we find those who, unlike the previously mentioned group, see the monetary deregulation of water as the *conditio sine qua non* for it to be truly conceived as a basic and fundamental life-sustaining good. The epistemology that emanates from this position goes beyond Cartesian division and understands the world as a place of interactive connections where there is no room for the figure of a subject who takes objects from the outside in order to control them. Authors such as Shiva explain it in the following way: making water an economic commodity leads to it being valued not for its primary qualities of wellbeing and culture, but for its cost. In this sense, it is noteworthy how Shiva speaks of a kind of “economy of death” (Shiva, 2002b) that has made it possible to break the natural feedback cycles of ecosystems at a valid cost, while suspending the democracy of the affected peoples and desertifying lives in the presence of the destructive politics of capital. In other words, monetised hydric epistemology, in its eagerness to separate what is masterable in the physical world, from those who dominate at the level of thought and discourse, has not only succeeded in legitimising attitudes of resource exploitation, but has also favoured the hindrance and oppression of life itself. Thus, in addition to denying the necessary relationships between the participants—human and non-human, including water—in hydric systems, the dominant epistemology manages, on the other hand, to sweep away much of these agents of interaction. Nonetheless, the epistemology under discussion here, let us call it *non-monetised*, goes beyond mere critique and dares to construct new knowledge. Shiva starts from the concept of the original right of usufruct—not ownership—to speak of water as a natural right that is common to all species and ecosystems, and advocates for a “water democracy” starting from:

decentralised management and democratic ownership of water resources [as this] can efficiently, sustainably and equitably ensure the subsistence of all beings on the planet. Beyond the state and the market, there is the capacity that comes from the participation of communities. Beyond bureaucracies and corporate power, there is the promise of a water democracy. (Shiva, 2002a: 40-41)

It could be said, then, that this non-monetised epistemology is indeed a realist epistemology that balances its ideas around what can, in fact, be appreciated in aesthetic experiences of recognition rather than omission or ignorance. This epistemological approach, indeed, accounts for the global results of the mercantilisation of water as a consumer product, ranging from the massive desertification of ecosystems to the generation of pollution rights instead of

penalties, not to mention the endangering of lives, both human and non-human alike. In this respect, Hernández-Mora states that “water is a public good and has to be managed with equity, transparency and participation, not with market criteria” (2023: 12). Thus, the aesthetic that is articulated here composes a conscious appreciation of the real sensibilities of all those involved, breaking down the boundaries established by capital between the most and least developed countries. This is not limited to sensibilities belonging to human beings, but also includes those of the different life forms that populate the Earth and that feed back to water—and vice versa—in hydric systems. It could be said that this aesthetics neither omits or ignores. It is an aesthetics that recognises the negative and thus experiences it. Returning to Dewey, the following quote serves to clarify what this renewed aesthetic experience is all about:

Experience is *of* as well as *in* nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature [...] Things interacting in certain ways *are* experience; they are what is experienced. Linked in certain other ways with another natural object—the human organism—they are *how* things are experienced as well. Experience thus reaches down into nature; it has depth. It also has breadth and to an indefinitely elastic extent. It stretches. That stretch constitutes inference. (Dewey, 1948: 4)

Therefore, an aesthetic experience that is aware of its own implications is one that recognises all interacting elements equally: people, animals, water, ecosystems. It is an aesthetics that recognises itself as embedded in the world, and thus expands. Furthermore, it could be said that this non-monetary hydric epistemology, and the aesthetics linked to it, correspond to a large extent with the new contemporary philosophical tradition, which was born in the 20th century as a counterpart to the heritage of the Enlightenment and attempts to view knowledge as *embodied* in the world. Authors such as Whitehead, Bergson and Merleau Ponty, among others, have been fierce defenders of the rupture of the mental-physical world binomial postulated in Modernity and, as we can see, these ideas are found in the premises from which Shiva develops her argument.

In short, both epistemologies build their arguments around the idea of water as a fundamental resource for life, but find very different ways of managing and understanding this basic good. These two epistemologies can be synthesised as follows:

- a) The monetised epistemology, on the one hand, turns water into a product that must enter the market at high prices, once the vital needs of human populations have been covered, in order to avoid the excessive exploitation of this resource.
- b) The realist or non-monetary epistemology, on the other hand, argues that it is precisely this market that turns survival into a business, and that is why its implementation must be eradicated in favour of advocating for community and responsible interspecies management in the face of different ecosystems challenges in different places. In this way we can avoid globalisation becoming our *modus operandi* and we can be more aware and sensitive to the particularities of each space and population.

As we can see, although this may seem to be a discussion more typical of the political or market realm, the epistemic components that drive both positions result in this debate being framed within the philosophical arena, offering information both about the present ways of developing knowledge regarding water as well as about the widespread aesthetic experiences and ontological status that we confer to this element.

Common knowledge: How can we measure both epistemologies?

Earlier in this paper we observed—despite the clearly opposing visions of many great thinkers—that in the realm of common knowledge, a different trend can be found. The importance of water as an indispensable resource for the sustenance and survival of ecosystems has gained recognition and, at the same time, its commercialisation is allowed, perhaps despite not being in complete agreement with regimes of capital. In fact, upon reflection, the idea of water as a common good for all species and ecosystems does not prevent us from welcoming its monetisation. But, how can an animal or a plant exercise their right to have unpolluted water if they do not engage in monetary exchange practices? Something does not quite add up here. In other words, the two epistemologies are interwoven in the way people think outside of the context of philosophical debates or market disputes. What happens here is that common knowledge embraces these two ways of understanding water, creating an overlap. In this sense, epistemology and common aesthetics are at an impasse independent of the theoretical controversies about the place of water in societies. There is an explanation for this, namely that the continuous exaltation of the presentism to which people are subjected, the logic of the instant, makes them live this day as if it were their last, subject to a past that appears obsolete and expectant of a future that is never to come. It is not only that people live in the present without having a past to hold on to, but they also presumably experience a future orphanhood. Their thinking now focuses on the “abyss” (de Sousa Santos, 2010), a way of proceeding on the basis of categorical divisions between what is conceivable and what appears hidden and can therefore be ignored. That is, in the realm of common thought there is actually an acknowledged sensory experience of life and, on the other side, a hidden aesthetics of consequences. The separation that exists between social and systemic practices—especially in the Westernised world—and the future effects that emanate from them, isolated from collective knowledge, makes reconciliation between these two parts impossible. To reiterate, in the richest areas where contemporary human existence takes place, people have even ceased to think about or experience the results of their own actions. This is all the more striking when it comes to the issue of water management. Therefore, it can be said that people are dispossessed of their own aftermath, which transcends the epistemic realm and disappears from common knowledge, instead moving elsewhere, to a place that is also invisible to the great capitalising eye of the developed world. The aesthetic experience is completely alienated, as the ways and the extent to which we appreciate or experience water are being prescribed in advance.

To better understand these arguments, a very illustrative example mentioned earlier in this paper can be used. The practice of drinking bottled mineral water is understood and experienced throughout the world as a healthy exercise in common sense—thanks to successful marketing—but this is done without taking into account the situations that arise in factories (usually located in developing regions), where the water that is extracted for consumption was previously used by local populations and ecosystems. The result is the impoverishment of local communities and the pollution caused by the wastewater that remains. As noted by various speakers at the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2015 (IPCC): “[cities and towns that host water corporations are] surrounded by water, but the people have nothing to drink. This means a future of violence, illness, and poverty” (Schroering, 2019: 29). Similarly, there is also a significant lack of concern about what happens after the mineral water in our bottles runs out, i.e. the management of plastic waste. In general, waste is understood as something finite that happens in an instant and is no longer thought of once it is put in the rubbish bin. However, the plastic island in the Pacific Ocean tells a different story: our waste has a life far beyond temporary deposits. Even though companies advocate for sustainable practices, “one wonders why nearly 80 percent of the plastic water bottles are not being recycled and what the major water bottling companies are doing to help rectify the situation in keeping with their environmentally friendly marketing statements” (Bartol, Canney, Cunningham, Flaherty and McNamee, 2011: 4). Therefore, the act of drinking bottled mineral water, while experienced as an enriching practice of joy for one’s own body, is undoubtedly a destructive event for the ecosystems and lives on our planet. This kind of practice is what Eaton calls the “problem of nonperceptibles”, explaining it as follows: “When stretches of time and space become too big, human beings can no longer ‘see’ them—and hence it is hard to conceive of how aesthetic experience at such scales is possible” (Eaton, 2000: 186). That is to say: a nonperceptible is that which is ignored, either because it exceeds our most immediate reality or exists beyond the limits of our perception. It is therefore that which we do not appreciate and which we consider not to exist, but that nevertheless is there. As a result, a nonperceptible constitutes an aesthetic omission. It is based on the indifference to experiences that seem too far away.

These aesthetic omissions are caused by the modern domain of epistemology—in our case and for the purposes of this paper, monetised hydric epistemology—and cause a crucial confusion (or misunderstanding) that results in the fact that, although we understand ourselves to be responsible, the unfolding of events shows that the very opposite is the case. What ends up happening is that the management of water and its consequent commodification crosses the lines of what is known and can be experienced, moving into an aesthetic field that is ignored and therefore not named, thus denying its existence. This being so, what monetised hydric epistemology achieves, instead of articulating new knowledge about water and hydrological systems, is to *veil* it. In other words, it is an epistemology that denies itself on account of its refusal to carry out the main task of the epistemic endeavour: elaborating knowledge and enunciating thought. Thus, one could call it an *anti-epistemology*. This is how we can conclude that the real effects of the so-called

healthy practice of drinking mineral water, among others, are unknown, because this kind of hydric anti-epistemology manifests in agreed actions of dispossession that deny the ability to know and experience the outcomes of our most common activities. We neither undergo nor are we aware of our own consequences.

It is therefore worth asking how we should frame people's general stance on the water issue, taking into account that their common knowledge encompasses these two modes of understanding. Thus, it can be established that:

- a) Firstly, the entanglement of idealisations that justify commodification must be recognised, and secondly, so must the conscious realities of expropriation and dispossession.
- b) The coexistence of the two visions and their overlapping gives rise to a set of aesthetic omissions that obscures the perceivables, ignores them, and therefore does not let us see further than what is strictly considered necessary by global markets.
- c) The implication is that common knowledge is enclosed and embedded in the experience of a future that is always to come and that does not allow us to explore beyond what is immediately our own, assuming that there is such a thing as the appropriable. We will return to this later.
- d) The anti-epistemology of water, nonperceivables, pollution and water exploitation have global effects and end up shaping the very life of the planet.

Hence, trying to fit oneself into either of the two epistemologies is, indeed, pointless. Although clear differences can be established that separate them, in the realm of common knowledge this has not proved to be a useful form of demarcation. On the level of discourse, we are convinced that there are two opposing positions, but in truth, people have never had to confront this dilemma in their own thinking. There exists a general acceptance of the idea of water as a common good that is nevertheless monetisable at the expense of the suffering of ecosystems and populations. In this case, instead of choosing one side or another, would it not be a question of re-ontologising water itself, of making it something new? Perhaps the actions to be taken should be to generate new aesthetic experiences, to begin to contemplate everything that remains hidden—in other words, to stop obscuring and start aestheticising. We should concern ourselves with aesthetically experiencing the complete cycle of water management and knowing its story, from the moment it is extracted to the final resting place of our discarded plastic bottle. Tafalla states, speaking of the aesthetic experience of eating and the origin of food, that:

Esa es la película completa. Y, si la tenemos en cuenta, comenzaremos a elegir los alimentos de otro modo, porque buscaremos aquellos que nos proporcionen experiencias estéticas más interesantes desde los orígenes de la producción hasta la gestión de los residuos. Comer es participar en una historia, y tener una experiencia estética profunda de la comida implica conocer la historia entera. [...] Una estética trivial, fácil y rápida que no implique hacerse preguntas nos ofrece una satisfacción instantánea y nos hace sentir más seguros que una *estética seria, profunda y crítica* que nos embarca en un viaje inacabable de aprendizaje. (That is the whole picture.

And if we take this into account, we will start to choose food differently, because we will look for food that gives us the most interesting aesthetic experiences, from the origins of production to the management of waste. To eat is to participate in a story, and to have a deep aesthetic experience of food is to know the whole story. [...] A trivial, easy and quick aesthetics that does not involve asking questions gives us instant satisfaction and makes us feel more secure than *a serious, deep and critical aesthetics* that embarks us on an endless journey of learning.) (2019: 343-345, emphasis added)

This aestheticising will then consist of understanding water for what it is and how it exists in all its temporality and spatiality, not for the profit it provides or the thirst it satisfies. In the same line, Saito argues that a new aesthetic sensibility should be cultivated in order to educate about the consequences of aesthetic preferences (2007: 78), which is to say that widespread appreciations—for example, regarding mineral water—have important effects that are not even known and to which attention should be paid. Therefore, what is proposed below will deal with the aesthetic reconstruction of dominant experiences, seeking to illuminate the path towards beginning to glimpse new ways of understanding and interacting with water.

Foresight: an exercise in aesthetic epistemology

According to what we have discussed above, there seems to be quite a large gap between what is known and what actually happens. Thus, it seems prudent to ask the same question posed by Eaton: “How can one explain how knowledge concerning the nonperceptibles that often determine ecological health is important, perhaps even necessary, for aesthetic appreciation of nature?” (Eaton, 2000: 185). To solve this problem, let us look at an aesthetic exercise of recomposition to help us to understand and perceive the full “extent” of the sensory potential of water—in allusion to Dewey—and thus be able to experience nonperceptibles. Obviously, this process of recomposition can by no means take place in pragmatic terms, but must be approached from an ontological level. We therefore speak of re-categorising widespread knowledge about the world, that is to say, to re-articulate the epistemological fabric of certainties and, thus, be capable of understanding in other ways, little explored until now. In other words, rather than operating around proscribed partial aesthetic experiences that we take as our own, we should start paying attention to the unknown and take it as our axis of action so that we can consequently focus on the nonperceptibles, thereby giving them a name in order to bring them out of the abyss of experience.

Thinkers such as Foster Wallace have affirmed that there is no greater problem than “blind certainty” (2005), or, similarly, that one should not assume that reality and its important components constitute a closed issue. There are doubts as to where the capacity for choice—and therefore, freedom—originates. Although Foster Wallace refers to cognitive articulations, what is proposed here does not only involve the field of epistemic thought. The reconstruction that is proposed acquires deeper shades of meaning, since it refers to the very ontology of the agents with whom we live in the Earth system, that is, to everything that historically has been

known as *object* in traditional epistemology. To put it another way, despite the fact that this work involves the ontological dimension, it does so through the reformulation and aestheticisation of epistemological methods.

To better comprehend this process and its connection with the aesthetic field of sensibilities, we must turn to Naess, a pioneer of deep ecology, who urges us to make the real into a playing field between ethics and ontology, and vice versa. The author argues that, in order to understand the problems of contemporary ecology, it is necessary to *re-epistemologise* what is already taken for granted, to clarify ideas such as the fact that what is known about the world corresponds to the very concepts that human beings have modulated about the planet over centuries. To put it simply, what we understand is not the world as such, but the abstract structures we have built around it (Naess, 2008). Therefore, if we seek to find solutions to problems such as that of water, perhaps the best option is to change the very questions from which we start. Instead of asking ourselves “What is water?” and responding to this with ideas that have been given to us quite a long time ago, we should first ask ourselves the questions “What is the domain of water? What is its framework? Who or what is involved?” and try to respond by attending to everything that appears hidden, yet is fundamental.

In this scenario of uncertainties and new onto-epistemic doubts, and having seen that the notion of water as a basic resource for the sustenance of life is not enough to ensure its care, there is no other alternative but to turn it into something else, that is, to re-ontologise water and help human beings to understand it by other means. Within this framework of epistemological rupture, new thinkers are appearing and advocating for the recomposition of reality, starting not with detours away from enlightened thought—as postmodern trends might have done, although that would merit another paper—but starting from scratch and activating a communitarian reconstruction of the ways of accessing knowledge itself. This is where positions such as that of Zarka come in, affirming that the “emerging world”, which is yet to come, must take into account that the Earth and its ecosystems are not something that belongs to the human species by original right, but that *we* are the ones who belong to it. In his own words:

[...] la inapropiabilidad de la tierra como principio fundamental de un cosmopolitismo adaptado a los desafíos de nuestro tiempo. La inapropiabilidad define nuestra relación pre-originaria con la Tierra-suelo. A su vez, ésta revela el vínculo que nos une a la humanidad y a todo el mundo vivo, dependiente de la responsabilidad humana. El vínculo pone de relieve la pertenencia y la solidaridad. No es un vínculo tan sólo biológico, ni simplemente moral, sino también jurídico. [...] La inapropiabilidad de la Tierra obliga a pensar *la sustitución de una relación de apropiación por una de pertenencia*. [...] la pertenencia ya no significa una propiedad, sino una co-naturalidad constituyente de lo que somos. ([...] the inappropriability of the earth as a fundamental principle of a cosmopolitanism adapted to the challenges of our time. Inappropriability defines our pre-original relationship with the Earth-soil. In turn, it reveals the bond that unites us with humanity and the entire living world, dependent on human

responsibility. The bond emphasises belonging and solidarity. It is not only a biological bond, nor simply a moral one, but also a juridical one. [...] The inappropriability of the Earth makes it necessary to think of *the substitution of a relationship of appropriation by one of belonging*. [...] belonging no longer means a property, but a constituent co-naturalness of what we are.) (Zarka, 2016: 48-51)

According to this, the starting point must be to rethink the primary relationships that we establish with the environment, undoubtedly implying the breakdown of knowledge as it was established in Modernity and the inheritance of which remains to this day. Based on these premises, the fact of *knowing* would no longer be a merely contemplative act and would begin to involve the recognition of a direct relationship with the physical space which, as the author rightly points out, is “constitutive”, far from being simply one of domination or interaction. That is to say, what is outside is not there to be possessed—according to monetised hydric epistemology—or to be interacted with—according to non-monetary epistemology—but rather what is outside is not *there* in a spatial sense at all. That *there* is part of us and vice versa, so that the *outside* loses its meaning. In order to materialise this new knowledge which, at the same time, entails a categorical re-ontologisation in the sense that there is a new understanding of *how* everything works, it will be necessary to make the aesthetic apparatuses into operative agents when it comes to accessing knowledge about—or rather, of—the world. Therefore, the exercise to be explored starts from a new epistemology that, above all, must begin with an aesthetic reformulation centred on the experience of nonperceivables that activates knowledge based on extended perception to its full potential. If one thing is clear, it is that actions must be undertaken to address the issue in order to prevent adverse effects and stop the unsustainability and harshness of Westernised lifestyles. By 2050 alone, the global need for water will increase by one third, while one third of humanity—a population that is expected to increase—currently does not have enough of it to cover its basic needs (Valladares, 2023: 53).

The aestheticisation of water proposed here, together with its re-ontologisation, must go beyond mere communication and turn into new ways of proceeding, relational artefacts that recognise a new epistemology that de-objectivises water, whether as a product and appropriable good or as an ungovernable resource. This means that water is not a thing, but an earthly agent exchanging feedback with the beings that inhabit the planet and are nothing but part of its own ecological body. A return to Lovelock’s Gaia, which, as Latour states, should be understood as a superorganism that behaves as a self-regulating system, without parts and without whole, without pilot or engineer (Latour, 2017), a breeding ground full of connections among which we find ourselves, as well as water. It is therefore a matter of articulating new ways of constructing knowledge, of re-establishing the common imagery and making this an interactive space that understands water not as an object to be used and consumed, but as an agent to be cared for and conserved. It is not a question of commercialisation or mere management, but of carrying out a hydrological reformulation and thus being able to establish a dialogue with water in order to account for its contingent existence. Actions are already being

undertaken in the artistic spheres to address this issue. There are some projects that propose new ways for the appreciation of hydrological problems by translating scientific data into aesthetic experiences, which result in spectators being able to access knowledge via their own sensory apparatuses, thus becoming aware of the ecological challenges of water management and understanding water not as a masterable object, but as an active agent of the world that participates in both its past and future. This is the case with Dutch artist Daan Roosegaarde's WATERLICHT project (2023) which, through the projection of blue LEDs that move in response to real wind and rain data, exposes the potential rise in water levels while engaging the spectator and creating the sensation of sinking (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Daan Roosegaarde's WATERLICHT at Dutch District Water Board Rijn & IJssel, Loevestein Castle, Amsterdam.



Note. Adapted from *Studio Roosegaarde* (<https://www.studioroosegaarde.net/project/waterlicht>).

In summary, although the lines of action to be followed do not offer concrete paths, it becomes necessary to approach the issue of water both from an analytical perspective as well as with a more experimental aesthetic focus. Only in this way, by recognising the dominant epistemologies, can we then proceed to de-territorialise existing relationships, to flee from the logic that has directed thought until now, and to create new spaces of constituent recognition that do not respond to purely epistemic reasoning, but rather start from a body of *aesthetic knowledge* capable of appreciating the breadth and depth of its own capacities. This constitutes a re-ontologisation which is necessary in order to be able to recompose a world that is not given to us but that itself composes us. This can result in positive political-ecological actions that can relate environmental philosophy with practice by promoting an aesthetic turn of the sensory appreciations around water, and therefore give it a leading ontology beyond merely being scenographic material in

the process of sustaining life on Earth. In this sense, and in response to the questions posed above, “What is the domain of water? What is its framework? Who or what is involved?”: since it is not the case that the world is just *there* to be used up and consumed or have its resources spent, but that, indeed, the world is constitutive of us and assimilates us, as such, the framework of water must be considered part of us. At the same time, we are part of it—it is a *total* fabric in which all beings that accompany us in the Earth system are involved. Insofar as we are water and water is everything else, the conceptions we have of it and the ways in which we experience it will thus speak of our own identity.

Conclusions

It should be emphasised how the story of water, in addition to being a key issue in ecological, political and commercial discussions, also has the potential to be framed in the field of philosophical thought, revealing ontoepistemic questions that lead to the necessary reconstruction of the aesthetic apparatuses in order to approach the problem in new ways that can contribute to its effective and active care. As a result, the following conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, on the theoretical academic level, there are two epistemological approaches that determine the ways of understanding water and hydrological systems. On the one hand, there is monetised hydric epistemology, inherited from Modernity, which justifies economic dominion over water based on its value as a fundamental resource for life. Water is thus understood as a human good over which power is held. On the other hand, and in contrast to the first proposal, a non-monetary hydric epistemology arises which, to a large extent, corresponds to the contemporary tradition of embodied knowledge, and it is through this that water is recognised for its primary value as a common resource of Earth. Thus, economic control loses its meaning as the modern dualism between the mind and the physical world is broken down.

Secondly, and despite the fact that in the previous theoretical dimension both epistemologies are differentiated and opposed, in the common level of popular knowledge something different can be observed: the two ways of understanding water coexist. Thus, both epistemologies are interwoven, giving rise to aesthetic contradictions that provoke both a series of accepted sensory experiences as well as others that are kept hidden and that would correspond to the dimension of consequences. This aesthetic alienation is identified by its peculiar role of denial, through which people are exempted—or prevented—from experiencing the consequences of their own actions, as is the case, for instance, with the practice of drinking bottled mineral water.

Thirdly, the sensibilities that are generated and recognised, confronted with those that are forgotten, reveal an event of considerable importance, namely that the epistemological coexistence that takes place in people’s way of thinking does not actually structure possible ways of accessing knowledge, but rather denies them to a large extent. Hence, one can speak of the presence of a dominant hydric anti-epistemology that rejects knowledge and has global effects on life on Earth.

Fourth and finally, an exercise of re-ontologising water and hydric systems is proposed as an object of study, to be carried out by reformulating epistemological methods and recognising aesthetic experiences as operative agents of access to knowledge. The main objective of this task is to argue possible ways to explore new forms of knowing. In order to do so, philosophical questions need to be reformulated with the aim of reconstructing the given ontologies, and with this in mind, one must start from a categorical rupture of knowledge itself. That is to say, it is necessary both to rethink the primary relations that human beings establish in the world, as being a part of it, and also to admit their own contingency and that of everything else, so as to be able thereby to reach knowledge from aesthetic experiences and, finally, to be capable of understanding via methods that until now have hardly been explored.

This paper focuses on hydric systems as the central axis for epistemological discussion, but the proposal for re-ontologisation proposed here is, in fact, much broader. The aesthetic-epistemological turn that is sought, therefore, could affect not only the water controversy, but has the potential to transcend the boundaries of closed elements and thus embrace the experience of life itself. In this sense, further research will have to broaden its scope and, through the transdisciplinarity of the aesthetic and epistemological apparatuses, try to materialise new ways of accessing knowledge. In short, it is hoped that, from this new approach, political and ecological actions can emerge which, hand in hand with the people's own perceptions, will contribute to drawing new approaches to the socio-climatic challenges of our time.

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