

HOMO SAPIENS,
A PROBLEMATIC
SPECIES

AN ESSAY IN PHILOSOPHICAL
ANTHROPOLOGY

BY
MIA GOSSELIN

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An Essay in Philosophical Anthropology

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Preface

The path of an academic career, at least in Belgium, but no doubt also in other countries, is not always predictable. At the Free University of Brussels the task of teaching philosophical anthropology was assigned to me in my younger years, though it was not my speciality. Probably it was expected of me that I would teach this discipline in the spirit of existentialism, an offshoot of German idealism which was very popular on the European continent. However, I had studied the work of Nietzsche, who like his *maître à penser*, Schopenhauer, was an anti-Hegelian. Being convinced that science based on empirical data offers the best guarantee for understanding nature and ourselves, even if, or rather because, the results of science can always be critically assessed and replaced by new ones if necessary, I rejected idealism and metaphysical explanations. A new type of philosophical anthropology seemed necessary.

Perhaps as a reaction to existentialism, its idealistic roots and its strong literary components, I specialised in the drier matter of epistemology and the foundation of science. I had received a thorough education in the history of philosophy, for which I am still grateful, and studying the growth over long periods of time of the Western conception of man and of his place in nature, I became aware of the contrast between this general conception as expressed in the work of philosophers and what we can learn about our species in different scientific disciplines.

The genealogy of Western anthropological views is the subject of the first volume of my book. In the second volume I study the scientific conception of the human species, how science pictured over time the nature of life and the origin of species in general and that of our own species in particular. I also try to understand what science says about, *inter alia*, what is specific to our species that makes us so destructive for our environment, why we are aggressive to our congeners, and many other features of our kind, most of them related to its problematic character.

It is not the place in the preface to this first volume to elaborate on the themes of the second volume, but the link between the first and the second one must already become clear. On the one hand Westerners have a specific view of the world that is anthropocentric, whereas on the other hand science considers our species to be only one amongst all others and studies it as a natural phenomenon. It is this unresolved contradiction that I want to expose.

Westerners have acquired a dominant position in the world and especially in world economy, from which follows its political power. It is in Europe that modern science developed and that, through technology making use of its results, the industrial revolutions took place, which in their turn gave rise to the welfare society of today. In many countries of the third world Western lifestyle was and is seen as identical with progress. It is not always understood that at its base is a fundamentally anthropocentric world view in which man is considered

as a reality apart from and even opposed to nature. The loss of the harmony between man and nature has important negative consequences. My aim in the first volume is to examine how this world view came about over long stretches of time and to lay bare its roots.

Here follows a short overview of its content.

- Part I. The general conception in prehistoric and ancient cultures was that the world was one (monophysism): nature, the Gods, the ghosts, all plants and animals, men, rocks and rivers formed one whole. First I try to grasp the psychology behind primitive thought (Chapter 1). Secondly, I try to understand the primitive conception of what it is to be a human individual and to analyse the logic of this type of thought. The latter is completely different from the logic Aristotle introduced in the West that was generally adopted for practical and scientific matters in Antiquity, but also in the Middle Ages and thereafter. (Logic is to be understood in its general sense of what is accepted by a cultural community as valid reasoning.) (Chapter 2). Even today our logic in daily life and in science is basically Aristotelian. Aristotle rejected the logic of his master Plato and stressed the advantages of his own theories on the subject. However, transcendent metaphysics claims that Aristotelian logic is not suitable for philosophy and reverts to more primitive ways of reasoning. (I think the fact that in European culture, save in religious and metaphysical matters, Aristotelian logic was used, explains in an important, but not exclusive way, why modern science developed in Europe). (Chapter 3).

- Part II. The first Greek philosophers saw man as a natural phenomenon, an integral part of the rest of reality. To them the major question was how out of the original chaos the ordered world, the cosmos, had arisen. Absorbed by scientific and practical matters, religious and moral questions were not central. They were famous in their own time, but a fundamentally different philosophical approach to reality replaced their views. Man was in this new idealistic conception exalted as a spiritual being, the only creature possessing a soul reaching out for a reality behind reality. Atomism, a successor of the philosophy of nature, combating superstition, never became as popular as philosophies that promised under one form or another life after death (Chapter 4).

The religious source of inspiration, Judaeo-Christianity, is of course all-important. Man is created by God to whom he owes his existence and he is given by him the assignment to reign over nature. This separate creation of mankind means that we are willed by God, chosen to exist. We are a necessary part of the divine plan and have a mission; we must contribute to the realisation of the Kingdom of God on Earth. At the moment of the conception of each individual God breathes life in him or her and thus we are endowed with a soul determining what kind of person we become. We have free will and are judged by our deeds, but also by our intentions.

Christian religion, in order to become well-established in the Hellenistic world, had to give its rather simple doctrine an intellectual structure that could appeal to more educated people and more powerful members of society. The spiritual leaders of early Christianity saw the dangers for their faith contained in Greek philosophy and the latter was only acceptable as, like it was termed later on, the “servant maid of theology.” It seemed to the Church Fathers that the best choice for their purpose was Platonism and neo-Platonism. The eternal soul, its purity and life after death were for the believer what really mattered. The body and its urges had to be kept in check; the material world was unimportant in the light of the promise of salvation for those who were pure of heart. Aristotelian logic (called dialectics in the Middle Ages) should not be applied to matters of faith, because it could lead to conclusions that were in contradiction with the main dogmas, such as the Holy Trinity. It is only in the thirteenth century that the philosophy of Aristotle, after a long struggle and in a Christian version, was accepted by the authorities as an alternative to Platonism. The eternal soul and life after death remained the central issue.

Though at the end of the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance the picture of our solar system profoundly changed and though the excellence of man was no longer only due to the grace of God, but to his own creative force, the picture of man remained the same on a more fundamental level. The earth now turned around the sun rather than the other way round, but man was still the crown on the work of God (Chapter 5).

In Modern Times we can witness a profound contrast between rationalists and empiricists: if all knowledge comes from God and the concepts stem from him, we are the only rational beings; however, if we acquire knowledge through our senses, so do the animals and there is a certain gradual continuity between the species, between the animals most closely related to us and ourselves. It is rather difficult to know what the real religious convictions of these philosophers were, because in their time, the seventeenth and eighteenth century, they could not freely speak their mind. Descartes was always cautious not to offend the religious authorities. He insisted that the soul and free will existed, because otherwise there was no foundation for morality in the prospect of reward after death for living the good life. Animals had no soul; they were complicated and well-functioning machines. Hume on the contrary, who was a sceptic where biblical truth was concerned, expressed his conviction that neither the soul (an ego or self) nor free will existed. To him the continuity between animals and men was an evidence. We have to take into account that these philosophers, besides having different philosophical views, lived in different countries and in different periods (Chapter 6).

We could easily be tempted to believe that with the evermore rapid progress made by science everything would change at the end of the eighteenth and nineteenth century where the picture of man and his relation with the rest of nature is concerned, but if we read Hegel and Marx, respectively an idealist and Deist and

a materialist and atheist, we realise that both have a profoundly anthropocentric view and that for both all that matters to man is man. Hegel humanises nature by thinking it, Marx humanises it by transforming it by labour. Reality is a dynamic process that of necessity must lead to an end that can be compared to what for the Christian is the establishment of God's Kingdom on Earth at the end of times. For Hegel it is the realisation of the World-spirit, for Marx the establishment of a society without classes. Reality must still accomplish itself through the thoughts and the actions of men, but that the final goal will be reached cannot be doubted. In both cases, the motor of the process is man, who has a mission in this world (Chapter 7).

In spite of a number of precursors, the first and to my knowledge only philosophers to break explicitly and radically with this millenary tradition of anthropocentrism and the belief the soul is a substance (i.e. can exist in its own right) are two atheists, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Schopenhauer insists that man *is* his body and by this fact is part of nature that is the expression of the Will, *das Ding an sich*, (reality as it is *in se*). Kant, who invented the concept, believed that reality as it is in itself could not be known by man, but Schopenhauer claimed that it could be intuited speculatively. In Nature there is only one law, the struggle for life, which man also obeys, leaving him bereft of free will. The world is not good, rational or divine. It is a vale of tears. When we witness the cruelty of nature, we must accept that we are not different. Influenced by Eastern thought, he sees as a solace universal compassion. Nietzsche rejects Schopenhauer's metaphysics, his pessimism and universal compassion. Nevertheless, he has inherited many of his fundamental ideas. Thus he believes man is part of nature; we are a species amongst species. He adopts evolutionism and either we are going to evolve into a new kind of creature he does not define, save as utterly different from the species we are now, a creature he calls "Overman" or "Superman," or we become a superlative of what we are now, and we become "the last man," who in his eyes is despicable. He is an outspoken anti-humanist and never tires of exposing anthropocentrism and of showing it is a farce. He denies free will and rejects subjectivism. Body and mind are one. The role of consciousness and self-consciousness is exaggerated by idealist philosophers. Too much of them can even be negative, because by too much reflection and self-reflection we are prevented from spontaneously following our instincts, which he is the first philosopher to value positively. General moral values are to be replaced by the values each individual creates for himself.

Nietzsche became very famous, but he was not understood. The Nazis claimed him for their racist cause, he was wrongly considered a vitalist (vitalists see Life as a creative force, a substance existing in its own right), the existentialists saw in him a forerunner and some religious philosophers even denied he was a genuine atheist. His influence on the picture we have of ourselves and our place in nature was minor (Chapter 8).

Again, in the twentieth century we find the same old claims: reality is ontologically layered and man is unique by being at once a material and a spiritual being, by relating the material world to a transcendent reality. Man is necessary, he has a mission. Philosophical anthropology was an invention of the heirs of German idealism. They wanted to give an answer to the problem posed to metaphysics by Darwinism. Man could not be simply a species like all other species, he had to have unique qualities that explained the necessity of his existence and his role in this world. The common denominator of these anthropologies is clear: man is a unique kind of reality.

Next I treat of Teilhard de Chardin, who was a priest and a theologian, but also an archaeological anthropologist, quite famous for his scientific work. He courageously tried to reconcile his Christian faith and evolutionism. The Roman Catholic Church did not appreciate his views and forbade him to pursue this endeavour. He believed that species had evolved (not being a biologist, he was wrong on several points about how evolution took place). Behind evolution there was a divine plan, he assumed. Everything tended to an ultimate outcome, to God, or *Point Omega*, in which the circle was closed, an ever returning idea we can find in the philosophy of Plotinus.

The last section of this final chapter is devoted to Sartre, because I want to show that though he is an atheist, by inscribing himself in an old tradition and by declaring himself a humanist, he reiterates many themes of the Christian conception of reality under one form or another.

His starting point is the three H's: Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger. Reality is the product of our subjectivity; we are an ego or, but not an empirical one, determined by a genetic component and by a history of past experiences. It is an abstract ego that cannot be described in terms of qualities, but nevertheless lends us individuality. I can know who I am after I made all my choices at each moment of my existence. This is the explanation of his rejection of essentialism and of his famous dictum 'existence precedes essence.' We are not born with a specific soul instilled in us by God, that will determine at each moment our behaviour. This ego we are, and this is crucial, is on the contrary absolute freedom. If you ask if the choices I made were good or bad, the answer is that the only justification of my acts is that they are *my* acts. Sartre would have liked to be *causa sui*, his own cause and he thinks in our inner selves we all want this. As a child he experienced a crisis of identity: he was not necessary, he could as well not have been. Therefore, a recurring theme is this contingency he could not accept. Christians believe that they exist because God has willed it, or at least allowed it. Sartre lacks this faith and wants to become necessary.

Man is what is important to man. Like Hegel, Sartre is a Manichean: unreflective Nature is what he abhors most. A tree is there outside, but it is there as an *en soi*, an entity that is merely as it is; it is not there *pour soi*, for itself, because it cannot think itself. It needs a human being thinking: 'it is a tree,' to