

PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Keywords: Human being, natural and human sciences, spirit, impulse, exoneration, eccentricity, technique, Max Scheler, Arnold Gehlen, Helmuth Plessner.

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Summary

Human beings have always constructed images of themselves out of the need to know their nature and give a sense to their existence. From classical philosophy up until the contemporary era there have emerged multiple visions of the human being that are closely tied to the general philosophical conceptions from which they originated. *Homo religiosus*, *homo sapiens*, *homo faber*, *homo dionysiacus* and *homo creator* are the principal images that human beings have elaborated of themselves. In the twentieth century, thanks to the enormous development of the sciences, the need was felt to reconsider the human being and to understand it in its entirety, synthesizing, integrating and harmonizing the results of the scientific investigations in order to recompose in a unity the multiple aspects investigated and thus achieve a corresponding global image.

Placing oneself at the crossroads between philosophy, human sciences and natural sciences, philosophical anthropology wishes to retie the threads of a discussion so as to help human beings recuperate the understanding of themselves and identify the characteristic traits of their existence. Contemporary philosophical anthropology thus consists, to express it with a formula, in a reflection on the results of the sciences that in some way deal with the human being, in order to recuperate its "global image".

Scheler, Gehlen and Plessner are the authors who have provided this discipline with a new approach that is in step both with philosophical thought and with the modern developments of the sciences. Max Scheler, considered the initiator of this doctrine, was the first to feel the need to found an anthropology upon biological bases, but through the filter of a philosophical reflection. The other two Authors have continued along this line even though following a different path. All three of them have in any case felt the need to emphasize the difference between human beings and other living beings in such a way as to attribute to human beings a particular position in the cosmos. This is the pre-

understanding that the three authors have in common in spite of their different itineraries, approaches and problematics.

1. Contemporary Philosophical Anthropology

In the complex and variegated philosophical panorama of the twentieth century, alongside the major trends of Neo-Kantianism, historicism, phenomenology, existentialism, pragmatism and neo-positivism, a space is occupied by a tendency of thought called 'philosophical anthropology', perhaps less well-known and studied, but not less full of prolific stimuli and interesting research ideas. In the area of the more general ethical-anthropological reflection, the discipline proposes to bridge the gap between philosophy and science, by focusing on the problem of humanity, in order to present a global image of it such as to permit human beings to recuperate an understanding of themselves and to identify their characteristic traits, their nature, and their place in the world.

Whereas in the past the attempt was made to provide a response to the 'human problem' by withdrawing it from the general body of an already structured philosophical system, such as to pattern the anthropological question in the light of metaphysical, ontological, ethical and epistemological problems, it was only in the first decades of the twentieth century that the need was felt to provide a different response to the radical interrogation regarding humanity, while keeping in mind both the rapid development of the sciences, and the need of philosophy to reiterate its competency concerning such a specific and essential problem.

Faced with the 'human-being query', which philosophy has always presented, philosophical anthropology wishes to defend its critical and methodological function regarding all those sciences that deal with some aspects of the human being and claim an exclusive right to do so. Taking into account a point of view that is biological, technical-scientific, political, religious, economic, linguistic and socio-cultural, philosophical anthropology strongly re-launches the centrality of the relation between the individual and the environment, between natural and artificial, as between innate and acquired. It thus presents itself as a doctrine filled with a transversal subject matter of great modernity, aimed at confronting the challenges of contemporaneity, where the processes of the homologation and manipulation of existence collide with the needs of the freedom, autonomy and respect of individual rights.

1.1. Humanity and its Images in the Course of History

Human beings have always created images of themselves, in order to better know themselves with the awareness of never being 'given' once and for all, but of having to continually define themselves, impelled by the need to act, to fulfill, and to complete themselves by means of their own doing. A reflection upon the images of the human being that have emerged in Western philosophical thought is thus indispensable for whoever wishes to describe the characteristics of a specific period and the elements that differentiate it from all the others. Moreover, without beginning from an analysis of that which human beings have thought of themselves, it would not be possible for them to plan for themselves and, thus, to set forth towards the future.

In the ancient world we can encounter a certain parallelism between the history of the artistic images of human beings, and the history of what they understood of their being, as of their self-image on a philosophical level. Behind the proportion and balance that characterize Greek sculpture, it is easy to discern a philosophy of a Platonic kind that attributed to abstract and supersensory ideas every reality and earthly experience. The Greek statue goes far beyond the actual person that it intends to represent, inasmuch as it refers to a canon of proportion, harmony and balance precisely of the idea in accordance with which human beings were modeled, thus giving a perceivable form to a universal idea. Therefore, the image of the human being that characterizes a specific period of the history of thought becomes one of the fundamental criteria for a more thorough knowledge of the period and for distinguishing it from others on the basis of the images elaborated in previous and subsequent eras.

In no other era, with respect to our own, have the ideas concerning the essence and origin of humankind been so uncertain, indefinite and multiple in their poly-semanticism. 'We are the first era — as Scheler affirms — in which human beings have become completely and entirely "problematic" for themselves; in which they no longer know what they are, but at the same time know also that they do not know' (Scheler, 1926, GW IX, p. 121). Retracing, therefore, the 'self-image' that humankind has provided of itself in the course of centuries could help modern philosophical anthropology to illuminate the present situation.

Human beings have, in fact, always paused to reflect upon their physical and mental characteristics, their relations with nature, their first appearance in the world, and the physical and mental forces that act within them; as upon the directive lines of their biological, psychological, social and spiritual development. The philosophers, depending upon the various eras and tendencies, have given diverse responses to such interrogatives, thus constructing numerous and different 'images of the human being'. These can be considered solutions to the 'human-being problem' that are given within a particular philosophy, that is to say, within the sphere of a coherent and systematic speculation that involves all the problematics of philosophical thought, in the various areas of logic, epistemology, ontology and ethics.

The attempt to gather together, in its main points, a history of the self-awareness that people have of themselves is the task undertaken by Max Scheler in order to introduce his philosophical anthropology. It regards five fundamental representations concerning the essence, characteristics and origin of the human being, as produced by Western thought in the course of its history, and still widespread and dominant in our cultural area.

The first image, defined as the *homo religiosus* (ibid., p. 124), draws its origin from the Holy Scriptures. It reconnects with the Jewish-Christian heredity centered upon the belief in a supernatural world and on consequent feelings of fear and of hereditary fault. Portions of such an image are the creation of human beings by God, their origin from two early ancestors who lived in an earthly paradise, the subsequent fall from this state of beatitude, and finally the redemption of humanity on the part of the God become a man. The *homo religiosus* is characterized by a profound sense of anguish, anxiety and dissatisfaction, derived from the myth of the fall and of original sin. At the basis of

human nature there is thus an experience of rupture and of distancing, which still today weighs upon all of humanity, in the search of a well-being possessed and then lost, of a happiness felt and never again experienced, of which humanity nourishes an incurable nostalgia, and on which is founded the attitude of anguish and oppression that constitutes specifically the emotional-impulsive root of the Jewish-Christian world.

The second image of the human being derives from Greek culture or, more precisely, from one of the most important discoveries that the Greeks accomplished, filled with consequences for the history of the conceptions of the human being. It is the idea of the *homo sapiens* (ibid., p. 125), elaborated conceptually and philosophically by the most important Greek thinkers, such as Anaxagoras, Plato and Aristotle. This image is founded upon a clear distinction between the human being and the animal. However, it does not attempt to differentiate only empirically the human being with respect to the most similar animals, for example, the anthropoid monkeys, by ascertaining the presence of distinctive elements on a morphological, physiological and psychological level. With such a procedure we could never succeed in counterpoising the human being to the animal, but would instead be restricting our comparison to the single object taken into consideration, the chimpanzee, the orangutan or other anthropoids. This method could therefore never provide the necessary foundation for an idea of the human being as a superior being distinct from any other one existing in nature.

The conception of the human being as a being that dominates all of creation has instead to derive directly from the idea of God and of His similarity to His favorite creature. So to humankind one has to attribute a specific and exclusively characteristic element, absolutely not ascribable to the elementary faculties pertaining to animals and to plants: this element is that of reason (*logos, ratio*). The *logos* thus constitutes the *principium individuationis* of the human being, its primary superior faculty, absolutely irreducible and incompatible with the others that characterize instead the animals. Human reason is considered a partial expression of the divine *Nous*, which acts through the power of ideas and, as an eternal organizing principle, never ceases to produce this world and the order that regulates it.

It is possible to summarize this conception in four fundamental points: 1) there exists in the human being a divine spark; 2) the latter, and the power that orders the universe from the chaos, have the same origin; 3) this spark can, without need of experience, exhibit its own spiritual power (power of the spirit, autonomy of the idea); 4) it can remain constant throughout the historical becoming. Regarding these four items, there is a concordance among thinkers such as, in spite of all their differences, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant and Malebranche, before reaching, with Hegel's philosophy of history, the last and most important philosophical conception concerning the anthropology of the *homo sapiens*.

However, today one cannot deny the fact that this grandiose religious-metaphysical background is no longer taken for granted. This image, which from the Greek world, through the thinking of many philosophers, has been projected up until the modern era, has been flanked, since the scientific revolution, by the naturalistic one of the *homo faber* (ibid., p. 129). From this point of view, the human being is understood as the most

developed animal, and the creator of highly specialized instruments (such as language), which uses a part of its animal energy in cerebral activity.

According to this conception, therefore, human beings do not possess a rational faculty that qualifies them 'essentially', nor are they distinguished from animals from a 'qualitative' point of view, but they are distanced from them only by a difference of degree. That which is identified as spirit or reason does neither possess a metaphysical origin, nor its own autonomy that corresponds to the laws of being, but it is only a further development of the lower mental capacities, which we already encounter in the anthropoids. Humanity would be no other than a particular animal species, in which we see at work the same elements, the same strengths, and the same laws that are present in all other living beings, with the only difference of a greater complexity in the results.

The image of the *homo faber* is therefore that of a person without a spiritual or rational principle that has an independent metaphysical origin; without something, that is to say, that does not obey the same laws that regulate all living beings: a person whose particular capabilities, different from those of the animals, are only the result of a more pronounced development of the same mental attitudes already present in the anthropoid monkeys. This applies, in particular, with regard to a person's 'technical intelligence', i.e., the capacity to adapt oneself actively, and without useless attempts, to new and atypical situations, by means of an anticipation of the objective structures of the environment.

Human beings thus satisfy, in this contorted and indirect way, the fundamental tendencies of their species, common moreover also to the other animal species. They can therefore be defined as: 1) the animal that makes use of symbols; 2) the animal that adopts instruments and utensils; 3) the cerebral animal, that is to say, a being that uses its brain, particularly the cerebral cortex, in an extraordinarily plastic and complex way. Even the signs, words and concepts are none other than particularly refined mental instruments. There exists nothing in human beings, from an organic, morphological or physiological point of view that cannot be found also in the higher vertebrates; and, likewise, there is no mental principle that belongs exclusively to human beings.

The image of the human being, understood as *homo faber*, has as its distant ancestors the naturalism of Democritus and the materialism of Epicurus. It developed in the modern world through the philosophies of Bacon and of Hume, of the illuminists and the positivists, such as Comte, Mill and Spencer, reaching its apex with the transformism of Lamarck and the evolutionism of Darwin. Many arguments in support of this conception were presented by thinkers such as Hobbes and Machiavelli, no less than by scholars such as Feuerbach, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud and Adler.

The three images of the human being mentioned thus far (*homo religiosus*, *homo sapiens*, *homo faber*) have in common a faith in the progress of human history, as in the evolution of human beings and of society towards always more elevated forms of organization. The other two images, that of the *homo dionysiacus* and of the *homo creator*, break instead with this tradition and announce a new orientation of anthropological thought.

The distinctive element of this new anthropology tied to the image of the *homo dionysiacus* (ibid., p. 135) consists in the fact that, in place of the faith in the progress of humanity common to all the preceding theories of Western history, it substitutes the conviction of a necessary decadence of the human being. The latter appears as the 'traitor of life', of its fundamental values, its laws, its sacred cosmic sense, because using some simple surrogates it increased in a morbid way the consciousness of itself.

The human being would in this way constitute an *impasse* in the evolutionary chain, which can no longer proceed by means of the link represented by humanity, which is thus destined to become extinct, like many other animal and vegetable species. Even if its organism is in itself healthy, the human being as such is an illness, a fundamentally pathological tendency of life itself. Its spirit, or its presumed reason, were constituted by means of the process of corticalization, for which the greatest part of human energy is not at the service of the entire organism, but is utilized for the sustenance of the brain; in this way, humanity can also be defined as the 'slave of the cortex'. All of this then denotes an illness, a morbid orientation of life itself.

The 'earthworm', also known as human being, can well feel its self-importance and carve itself a role of protagonist in the course of history, to the point of founding nations, creating works of art, achieving always new scientific objectives, rather than remaining, like the animal, anchored to a single environment: this will not, however, permit it to exit from the 'blind alley' or to overcome the illness that constitutes the essence of its life itself. Thought and reason, of which humanity is so proud, can surrogate the weak and insufficient instincts, but they cannot succeed in avoiding an inescapable decadence. Even the freedom of choice, of which humanity is so proud, is nothing but a euphemism to hide the lack of direction and the constant indecision that characterize it, as compared with the instinctive security of the animal. All the human institutions and organizations are but miserable surrogates that come to assist a race biologically destined to become extinct.

The history of humanity will thus represent the gradual decadence of a species that has come to the world already mortally stricken, and that ever since its origin has represented a 'false step' of life evolution. It will be civilization itself that will destroy humankind, like an 'infernal' mechanism that will annihilate whoever produced it. The passage from spontaneous expression to mediated communication, from impulsive activity to conscious will, from the community to the society, from the organic conception of the world to the mechanistic one, from the society based upon the bond of blood to the state divided into classes, from the religions of the motherland to those that are patriarchal and spiritual, from magic to technology, from metaphysics to science, indicates the direction of the path of humanity towards death.

In the image of the *homo dionysiacus*, as in the preceding conception of the *homo sapiens*, the spirit or reason appears distinct from life and from the impulses of the soul; the two constituent aspects of the human being, rationality and vitality, are understood as two entities that are irreducible to each other. In the Dionysian image the spirit is regarded as a demon, the power that destroys life. The Dionysian is thus opposed to the *homo sapiens* or to the Apollonian of a Greek kind, of which it constitute an antithetical ideal. For the *homo dionysiacus*, the only course of salvation is the search — through

the elimination of the spirit, great usurper and despot of life — for a contact with the original vital impetus, in order to regain the lost unity. We can encounter echoes of this conception in Lessing (1919), who defines the human being as ‘a kind of rapacious monkey that has gradually become a megalomaniac for the development of its spirit’; in Bolk (1926), who sees the human being as ‘an infantile monkey with a disorganized system of internal secretions’; and also in the thinking of Bachofen, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Bergson, as well as in the psychoanalytic modern trends.

While the theory of the *homo dionysiacus* humiliates the human being as no other philosophical system had ever done (or at least that of *homo sapiens* that almost all the history of Western thought identified with the human being *tout court*), on the contrary, the fifth image of the human being, that of the *homo creator*, is an exalting one that provides such a proud and elevated vision as to be incomparable with any other preceding one. This new form of anthropology, which has recovered the Nietzschean idea of the superman while giving it new rational bases, takes on a philosophical aspect especially in Heinrich Kerler, Nicolai Hartmann, and the existentialism of Sartre.

The basis of this theory is the rejection of any form of religiosity, a rejection understood as a postulate of freedom and of responsibility. The atheism of the preceding centuries (materialism, positivism, etc.) considered the existence of God as something in and of itself desirable, but not demonstrable. Kant himself, who had confuted the proofs of the existence of God within the sphere of pure Reason, ended up by placing this existence as a universal postulate of practical Reason. The atheist anthropology of the *homo creator* sustains instead that, independently of that which we can or cannot demonstrate, a God cannot and must not exist if responsibility, freedom and duty are not simple words, and if the existence of the human being must have a meaning. Only in a mechanical and non-teleological world does a ‘real’ human being have the possibility of existing, while instead wherever there is a providential and omnipotent God there is no freedom for human beings to responsibly plan their own destiny.

The elimination of the divinity is perceived neither as a lessening of moral obligations nor as an attenuation of the autonomy of human freedom, but rather as the maximum of responsibility and of sovereignty in human choices. The Nietzschean phrase ‘God is dead’ expresses precisely the ultimate obligation of human beings who can lean neither upon a divinity that communicates to them what they must and must not do, nor upon scraps of old metaphysics, but must take upon themselves the divinity’s characteristic attributes (predestination and providence).

The analysis of these images has allowed us to highlight the way in which it is possible to identify in the various philosophical theories a conception of the human being, or rather, a response to the ‘human-problem’, by posing in this way the anthropological question in the light of the more general metaphysical, ontological, ethical and epistemological problems. Only in the twentieth century, instead, did it become necessary to provide a different reply to the radical interrogation concerning humanity, keeping in mind both the rapid development of the sciences, and the need of philosophy to reaffirm its competency regarding such a specific and significant problem. It is within this new context that philosophical anthropology presents itself as one of the possible paths that open themselves to the philosophical thought of the twentieth century, an

itinerary certainly not simple and flat, but surely indispensable in order to expound, in a way that is open, polysemantic, variable, and plural, the ‘human-theme’, which remains always a crucial question of every human research.

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Biographical Sketch

Maria Teresa Pansera received her University degree in Philosophy and Pedagogy at the “Sapienza” University of Rome. In the 1970s she had various scholarships at the Institute of Philosophy in the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the same university, and obtained PhD in Philosophy. In 1984 she became Assistant Professor of Moral Philosophy and conducted classes in Philosophical Hermeneutics, History of Modern and Contemporary Philosophy, and Philosophical Anthropology.

In 2000 she was awarded the chair of Associate Professor in Moral Philosophy at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University “Roma Tre”, and also taught Philosophical Anthropology. In 2011 she became full professor of Moral Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy, Communication, and Performance at the same University, and since 2012 she has been Director of studies for the degree courses in Philosophy and Philosophical Science.

She has been President of the Roman Philosophical Society for six years, and is currently a member of its Directive Council; Vice President of the Italian Society of Moral Philosophy; member of the Italian Council for Philosophical Studies; Teaching staff member of the Research Doctorate in Philosophy and Theory of the Human Sciences at the University “Roma Tre”. She is also a member of the scientific committees of the periodicals *Babelonline/print* and *Azimuth*, as of the series “Subjectivity, ethics, and psychology” published by Guida, in Naples; “Read the present” published by Asterios, Rome; and of “Babel the words of philosophy,” for the Mimesis editions, Milan.

Her research has been directed towards an in-depth analysis of themes related to the study of human beings from a philosophical and socio-anthropological point of view, addressing subjects such as the possibility of delineating an organic and unitary image of the human being. In particular, she has addressed these themes by analyzing the works of Sigmund Freud, Herbert Marcuse, Arnold Gehlen, Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and Vladimir Jankélévitch, approached with the intention of highlighting, within their specific philosophical issues, the particular response given by each of them to the “problem of being human.”