# What means ontology of the human? (Following some remarks of Derrida and, via Habermas, of Foucault)

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**Résumé :** En questionnant le concept d'ontologie de l'humain, l'article suggère la raison ouverte de philosophie, la recherche intégrée des problèmes humains. Il y a trois parties (inégales). La première parle de la critique de Derrida de l'anthropologisme. La deuxième souligne un lien entre la mise entre parenthèses du monde et l'ontologie. La dernière accentue le développement post-moderne de la compréhension de l'humain, en faisant usage de l'interprétation d'Habermas de l'analyse de Foucault de discours dans la relation avec les pratiques sociales. Là sont montrées quelques exigences de l'ontologie de l'humain.
**Mots-clé:** Derrida, Habermas, Foucault, la compréhension d'homme, post-modernisme.

**1.**

The entire history of philosophy – as well as the entire history of sciences, of the thinking as such – emphasised the historical character of the concepts, so of the understanding of the world. Deciphering the meanings of man's-existence-in-the-world, the content of concepts did send at the same time to dry descriptions and profound expectations: this constitutes "the conscience of the present where the historic thinking and the utopian thinking fusion."[1]

As we know, in the course of time the old philosophical analyses became sciences. Through deep specialisation, the human and social sciences arrived to a fragmented image of the world of man. Not very far from the common conscience, have these sciences approached the complexity of the existence of human beings – in limited, "sliced" contexts and under the influence of fragmented educational messages – in the same pattern of fragmentation and isolation. As a reaction, philosophy insisted on the

[1] Jürgen Habermas, „ La crise de l'État-providence" (1984), in Jürgen Habermas, *Écrits politiques*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1990, p. 124.

significances of the human interrelated with his world, thus on the interpretations which suggested an integral vision. As concerns as for the human and social sciences, even if an integrative approach appeared at the midst of the 19th century, only with the trans-disciplinary trend from the last decades of the 20th century this direction re-appeared.[1] Philosophy influenced this, as the development of the human and social sciences as well had a certain role in the evolution of philosophy. But in my opinion, there is rather a separation between these two lines, the impulse of a holistic approach by the sciences being the result of their development and of the proofs given by a fragmented and isolated scientific approach of the human being. The same is for philosophy. It was sometimes a game of reciprocal substitution of different schools of philosophical thinking, when they finished by weakening themselves: on one side, some problems and aspects became independent sciences; on the other side, the importance of a philosophical school appeared to a great extent as response to the exaggerations of another one: for example, hermeneutics towards positivism, phenomenology towards hermeneutics.

Nevertheless philosophy not only was, but is a forerunner for the integrative approach of the significances of the human action and existence.

There is no such a philosophical domain as the "ontology of the human". The main object of philosophy is just the human. The human is both the mediating term and the object upon which the philosophical reflection practiced. If ontology is the decrypting of what belongs to the human existence (what means also the human understanding and representations),[2] "ontology of the human" is rather a metaphor for the main analysis and object of philosophy. From this standpoint and in this broad sense, ontology of the human means putting the man first, i.e. philosophical

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[1] See *World views: From Fragmentation to Integration* (1994) by Diederik Aerts, Leo Apostel, Bart De Moor, Staf Hellemans,, Edel Maex, Hubert Van Belle, Jan Van der Veken, VUB Brussels 1994, http://www.vub.ac.be/CLEA/pub/worldviews.html (2-II-2002) Although philosophy is more than a world view provider – as Heidegger observed, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology. Introduction* (1927), http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/index.htm - it nevertheless followed the tendency of integration.

[2] Jacques Derrida, „Le supplément de copule. La philosophie devant la linguistique" (1971), in Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1972, p. 218: „Aristotle tended to re-conduct the analysis to the place of the turning up, or to the common root of the couple language/thinking. This place is of the ‚being'...But also how the *being* is said, how is said what is it, by the fact that it is, as it is."

humanism. In a more strict acceptation, the ontology of the human configures what phenomenology, ethics, the social philosophy, the political philosophy, (at least a part of) the philosophy of knowledge elaborate. The metaphor of ontology of the human suggests and presupposes rather an integrated representation on the human complexity, composed by so many fragments.

But this suggestion reflects that the manner to treat the human is always topical.

In this respect, the analysis Derrida made about the logic of anthropocentrism in the post-war French philosophy[1] is two-fold emblematic: for the contextual reactive behaviour of philosophy towards its own evolutions, and for its critical capacity.

The focus of Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) on the human-reality, so the structures of the human reality, was a reaction against the intellectualist, or spiritual, humanism that dominated the French philosophy, a desire to neutralise any metaphysical, speculative thesis about the human being. But, according to Derrida, because the unity of the being was defined as the unity of the human reality (this type of analysis of the totality of *Seiende*, as Heidegger formulated before, being just the phenomenological ontology), Sartre has not yet detached from a metaphysical anthropocentrism.[2]

What would has this detachment meant, for Derrida? A questioning of the concepts – of man and being – and their critique from a historical standpoint,[3] just for achieve the understanding of the unity of being-*nous*-language.

Just because anthropologism showed to be the common ground of different philosophies, as the speculative metaphysics and existentialism, after the IIWW it was possible (to continue) a metaphysical reading of Hegel, Marx, Husserl and Heidegger,[4] namely to impose a speculative

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[1] Jacques Derrida, „Les fins de l'homme" (1968), in Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1972.

[2] The representation of Derrida is that Sartre would have presupposed a model of man and that he would have analysed every problem in function of this model/putting the model and the human problems face to face.

[3] The accent on origin, the historical, cultural, linguistic limitations of the concepts was Derrida's post-modern meaning of philosophy.

[4] Jacques Derrida, „Les fins de l'homme", p. 138.

humanist presupposition as being their invariant assumption and to deduce conclusions from this presupposition.

But during the 60s, a new phenomenon manifested as a challenge for the critique of philosophy on itself: "the present questioning of the humanism is contemporary with the prevailing and fascinating extend of the 'human sciences' inside the philosophical field."[1]

In fact, in this new historical moment Derrida made a magnificent correction of the traditional reading of philosophy.

*The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Derrida insisted, was not anthropology but "the science" of the experience of the conscience, the "science" of the structures of the phenomenality of the spirit related to itself. At his turn, Husserl did not analyse the man as being-in-the-world, but the conscience. Nor Heidegger was not less reductively seen by the philosophers who have somehow assumed the metaphysical humanism; although Heidegger carried on the *concept* of being as to appear that "conscience is the truth of the man, for here man appears as being from the surpassed and conserved past, interiorised and pointed out (i.e. de-placed, raised up, substituted, promoted even in present)",[2] phenomenology being the truth of anthropology.

Following Heidegger, Derrida underlined that - if phenomenology emphasises the end of the finite man, or the finite as self-surpassed, and if as being as we are we are open questions – the strategic bet of philosophy, as well as its jolt, could come only from outside metaphysics: from the confrontations of the Western philosophy and from the human sciences about being (linguistics, ethnology). The future will see a disjunctive scheme of evolution: either continuing de-construction, by repeating implicitly the founding concepts and the problematic *ab origine* (that would be a

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[1] *Ibidem*, p. 139.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 143. See also Jacques Derrida, "Ousia et grammè. Note sur une note de Sein und Zeit" (1968), in Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1972, p. 74: „with the theme of time, all the themes that are depending on in *Sein und Zeit* (and especially the ones of Dasein, of finitude, of historicity) will no more constitute the transcendental horizon of the problem of being, but will reconstituted starting from the theme of the epochality of the being." And p. 75: „The de-limitation of Heidegger consists in...climbing on from the present to a more original thinking of the being as presence." And p. 76: „In this way the difference between the being and being, just that which would have been ‚forgotten' in the determination of the being in presence and of the presence in present, this difference is hidden to the point it does no more remain a trace."

consolidation), or the change of the ground of philosophy in discontinuous and irruptive manner, by asserting the rupture and the absolute difference.[1]

Thus, philosophy is not yet over. To question the concepts – as the one of self-foundation, which is specific philosophical[2] - and to transform the concepts in themes, or problems (I dare to add, by confronting the philosophical traditions and present debates with the present problems of the human, not only to remain in being but to better question the being): is a consistent ground of philosophy. In this way, "the self, the *autos* of the legitimating and legitimated self-foundation was to come (*reste à venir*), not as a *future* reality but as which will always keep the essential structure of a promise and cannot come but as such, as is to-come (*à venir*)."[3]

**2.**

Bracketing the world (Husserl), or some parts of it, was and is a main procedure of knowing it. By sciences, as it is well-known, but first and foremost, by philosophy. And this happened, just because philosophy started by questioning the "first principles", the reason of the existence. Just for this reason, philosophy seems to be nowadays rather an artefact following the successful effort of different sciences, including the ones which approach reality in a trans-disciplinary manner. So, why still philosophy in front of the human?

From the beginning of humanity, it was perceived the strong relation between everyday practices and the ability to express them. The evolution of this relation was the ground of its questioning: and because the external data seemed to be more important and obscure than the human endeavour to survive and to act, the first manifestation of the human need to know was (realist) ontology. By putting ontological questions (what is reality/existence and which are their characteristics, for they would descript the real state of things, and as to be appropriated in concepts), philosophy – as the first elaborated human wisdom – proved the level humankind attained but also the historical limits of the solutions. They all belonged to a metaphysical view, i.e. to one that transferred the position of consequence of the human judgement into a root and a place of the beginning. And even though

[1] Jacques Derrida, „Les fins de l'homme", p. 162.
[2] Jacques Derrida, *Le droit à la philosophie*, Paris, Galilée, 1990, p. 39.
[3] *Ibidem*, p. 41.

metaphysics did not stop after the Socratic turn, this one warned about the limits of forgetting the intimate interdependence between the exterior existence (exterior toward the human beings) and the interior existence: the feeling, the understanding, the explanation as internal precondition of the action, and thus of the human existence. More – that the subjective world would be the exciting urgency of philosophy.

In this respect, one could observe the intermittent (temporary) substitution of the situation of philosophy focusing on ontology with the one of philosophy focusing on different ways of feeling-perceiving-thinking-speaking-understanding-knowing, *and vice-versa*. The present philosophical language could define ontology of the human as research of the existence of the human being with the help of basic categories as man (he and she, obviously), purpose, freedom, constraints, contingency, action, attempt, error, individual, community, society, relationships, responsibility, issues, acceptation, revolt, submission, domination, human knowledge and so forth. If still Aristotle defined the matter of ontology as the Being which one is speaking about (so the relationships between the being, the thinking, the *logos*), ontology as such is by all means related to the human: only the technical requirement in the philosophical knowledge imposes "the bracketing", the separation. Consequently, the present ontological field of philosophy is linking to the fields of phenomenology, logics, hermeneutics and ethics: there are more sophisticated manners to put the human (as individual and collective) understanding and action between brackets. What are we seeing is rather the inertia of the tradition of fragmenting the human reality beyond the requirements of the philosophical specialisation.

And the last observation here: bracketing the world was and is a common "pragmatic" technique of philosophers and ordinary people. The difference is that if common people were and are pushed to "forget" the complexity of the world and the necessary integrative vision on it, philosophy requires from philosophers to never do this. However, this requirement faced a historical realisation.

**3.**

The relationship between ontology and the human is therefore not difficult to understand. But why (this type of) philosophy, if there are so

many social and human sciences focusing more precisely and effectively on the human?

There are at least two answers. One belongs to Michel Foucault, as this one was analysed by Jürgen Habermas. Foucault made a critique of the reason of human behaviour[1] – and this reason was emphasised and developed by the human sciences (or by their *mainstream*, in fact the one that imposes the contents of concepts and narratives) -: so just these sciences were "exposed".[2] Foucault took over the theme of critic of the reason from Nietzsche, mediated by Heidegger. But he applied this theme in his works of history of the human sciences.

Concretely, it is about the genealogical history of discourses used in the constitution of modernity, and constitutive to the relationships of power. Foucault constructed a philosophy focused on the critique of power, just as effort to surpass the metaphysical search of the "first principles" and the speculative humanism.

Foucault showed that the modern institutions have developed on the basis of mainstream discourses about (and against) the marginal situations. In this respect, madness was conceived by him as "complementary phenomenon to the reason."[3] Just this focus on the problem of the extension, i.e. the limits of the human sciences, is done: the counter-position of different human worlds is the result of the aim of Foucault to "make a history of the limits…with which a culture rejects something that, for it, will be the Exterior."[4] The human and social sciences have thus to transcend these limits and to be "the history of rationality".[5] That means the human and social sciences have not to study the society inwards the frame of the mainstream discourses.

This history of rationality is following from the permanent analysis of the relation between the discourses and practices. As Habermas observed,

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[1] Jürgen Habermas, *Le discours philosophique de la modernité (Douze conférences par Jürgen Habermas)* (1985), Paris, Gallimard, 1988, p. 301: „Foucault raises the notion of power to the rank of a historic-transcendental category inwards the frame of a historiography that critiques the reason."

[2] Jürgen Habermas, *Le discours philosophique de la modernité (Douze conférences par Jürgen Habermas)*, p. 281.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 282.

[4] Michel Foucault, *L'histoire de la folie à l'age classique. Folie et déraison*, Paris, Gallimard, 1961, p. IV.

[5] Jürgen Habermas, *Le discours philosophique de la modernité (Douze conférences par Jürgen Habermas)*, p. 283.

Foucault did not rest only with the counter-pose of opposed discourses in concrete contexts, for the "mute practices with which the discourses are linked are more important for the development of the human sciences."[1]

By insisting on the necessary relationships of the human sciences and the practices issuing the isolation and supervision (discipline), Foucault underlined in the concept of practice "the asymmetric, violent phase and exerted upon the freedom of other participant to an interaction."[2]

In this way, Foucault gave his own original meanings to the methods he used: that of genealogy and that of archaeology. Archaeology cleans the documents from the commentaries, but it looks for a pluralist supply of documents, and "reconstructs the stratification of the rules constituting the discourses".[3] At its turn, just because the mainstream human sciences consist in the supporting of contradictory discourses and practices – ones which legitimise the relationships of domination-submission and ones which sustain in an abstract manner that the human being would be their aim -, genealogy distances itself from this type of "humanist" suppositions.[4]

This "anti-humanism", or better this critique of the abstract and separated meaning of the concept of human being, is connected to the critique of the modern conscience of temporality: instead of focusing, in the traditional modern way, on the problem of origin – i.e. on the frozen structure that would be the precondition of a frozen trajectory – genealogy "has to go towards the discovery of contingent beginnings of discursive formations, to analyse the multiplicity of effective histories of the provenience and to dissolve the appearance of identity."[5]

It means that identity does exist neither between the historian and people he write about: the historical discourse is no more hermeneutic, for better understand (and accept) the status quo, but destructive of the old suppositions, critique and self-critique as well.[6]

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[1] *Ibidem*, p. 289.
[2] *Ibidem*, p. 287.
[3] *Ibidem*, p. 303.
[4] *Le discours philosophique de la modernité (Douze conférences par Jürgen Habermas)*, p. 312 : „Foucault assimilates the human sciences to this anthropocentric thinking, from Kant on, which mudded with its utopias into the practice of subjugation."
[5] Jürgen Habermas, *Le discours philosophique de la modernité (Douze conférences par Jürgen Habermas)*, p. 295-296.
[6] *Ibidem,* p. 298: „he puts between brackets this self-comprehension."

Therefore, if Foucault cancelled the dependence of history of a precondition made by the interested subjective way, he had at the same time to critique the concepts offered by this "philosophy of the subject." This critique consisted in and led to the rejection of a global historiography that "conceives secretly history as a macro-conscience." On the contrary, the critical theorist "takes into account a plurality of histories", by pointing out "the false continuities" and keeping attention "on the ruptures, the thresholds and the changes of direction:"[1] "he gives up to the principles of chaining, as the progress and the evolution".[2] Thus Foucault warned about the necessity to surpass both the ideological (mainstream) framing of the analyses/of the scientific discourses and the anthropocentric (speculative) perspective.

As Heidegger and Derrida who tended to follow Nietzsche's programme of critique of the reason, Foucault also did: the first ones – attacked metaphysics through a new type of understanding the being, he himself – opposed the human sciences through the analysis of discourses.

According to Foucault, the human sciences are pseudo-sciences because they do not express the fact that they themselves are compelled by the subject they discuss but who is self-referencing,[3] by their will of self-knowledge[4] and self-reification,[5] and by the power. In this way, modernity is contradictory in itself.

Thus, even though the human and social sciences developed, one always needs philosophy: not only as epistemology of the human and social sciences or as philosophies of domains as economics, politics, but as integrative transcending and emphasis of connections and significations of

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[1] *Ibidem,* p. 300: „The event – one has understand by this not a decision, a treaty, nor a reign, nor a struggle, but a relation of forces which inverses itself, a confiscated power, a vocabulary took over and returned against their users, a domination that is weakening, relaxing, empoisoning itself, another one which enters, masked."

[2] All the quotes from this paragraph, *ibidem,* p. 297.

[3] *Ibidem,* p. 309: „ the subject representing to himself becomes the unique basis of the last certitudes." And p. 311: „Since Fichte, the Self understood as reflecting the subject does this double experience, on a side to find itself in the world already as something opaque, something which became contingent, but on the other side to put itself to deal with…to make itself transparent and conscious of itself."

[4] *Ibidem,* p. 310: „this will of truth (AB, linked to the incitation of renewing the production of knowledge) is the key of the internal relationships between Knowledge and Power."

[5] *Ibidem,* p. 310: „The Self cannot posses itself, cannot ‚putting' itself but putting unconsciously a non-Self."

the human. At least - until new epochs and new transformations in the field of science appear.

By questioning the concepts and the consequences of the human thinking and action, the philosophical approach opens new problems / emphasises the problems for the conscience of man. Therefore philosophy contributes to the greater extend to the construction of man as an intellectual, so a human being who problematises the existence and puts under doubt the taboos, the mainstream discourses, the "eternal" data of the *Seiende*, including the "bracketed" manner of thinking. Thus philosophy is subversive towards every kind of power, it implies the resistance, and philosophers have to teach people to resist.