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Back to the Future a New Philosophy of Man or Philosophical Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

The biggest hurdle in 2500 years of philosophy has always been man himself – more specifically, the contents of his cranium, which a great many words have been used to describe. Existentialism and the Phenomenology of Perception (Merleau-Ponty) managed for the first time in the history of mankind to focus philosophy a bit more closely on ourselves. It took us until the end of the 20th century to come to the understanding that “we are our brain” (Dick Swaab) and that “we need to shift our focus from the mind to our brain” (Victor Lamme). What we then see is 100 billion brain cells, all “chattering with each other” (Victor Lamme), leading us to an initial insight into our history and evolution and our essential characteristics. We discover that our focus is now on processes in the brain, which I have chosen to call ‘experience’ or ‘the process of experience’. The neurological discoveries of the 20th century have not yet resulted in changes to our terminology; we still make use of outdated terms in talking about the new situation. I have given philosophical anthropology a new concrete substance on the basis of the definition of American philosopher and member of the American Philosophical Association Jim Dagenais: “a consistent overall vision of man and his world”, so that it can serve as the basis for philosophy and thus as the foundation for human life. The meaning of basic concepts is completely re-examined. Following developments in the 20th century, traditional definitions no longer serve our purpose; we must rigorously adapt our language to these developments so that it once again meets the basic requirements for communication. Then it allows us to describe a contemporary philosophy of human beings and to find answers to today’s questions and issues.

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The end of philosophy as a science in the Western world of the 21st century, because “the universe is not a thing, nor even a system of things, not an object or a system of objects, but primordially an interpersonal world, a world of and for persons” and “I” (the “I” of the “Cogito”) cannot be the starting point in philosophical investigation. (James Joseph Dagenais, 1923-1981)

The only claims which philosophy can make to leadership in the total enterprise of understanding man is its capacity to explicitate its own presuppositions. The foundation of science is always *relative to the science* in question, and not to any ultimate or absolute foundation; the latter is found only through an investigation of the ultimate sources of all knowledge. Thus, if the necessary presuppositions of a philosophy of man can be clarified and justified, its claim to be basic can be validated. The presuppositions of any philosophy, I maintain, involve a fundamental attitude towards myself, the other, and the world. The most fundamental evidence here is that *the universe is not a thing, nor even a system of things, not an object or a system of objects, but primordially an interpersonal world, a world of and for persons*. The problem of these persons is that they have constituted a world of objects and then have forgotten the act of constitution. In our world of technological objectivity, the human person, as the originator of objectivity, has become confused with his own creation. Our inability to remember our act of creation is coterminous with our inability to remember having forgotten. The main point, then, is an effort to remember, perhaps by negation more than by affirmation, what are the ineffaceable bench marks of our passage through the world in which, persons are in communication.

Regarding “myself”: The *Ego* as originator of the totality of the significance of the personal and natural world. Now, however, it is clear that “I” (the “I” of the “Cogito”) cannot be the starting point in philosophical investigation. Both the presuppositionless beginning and the absolute beginning implied in “my” being the starting-point of philosophy are impossible. The absolute beginning involves the question, “Can I know anything?” The response consists in returning to what is thought to be the least contestable minimum of affirmation as a starting-point in philosophy, and implies one or other variation of the *cogito* argument. (St. Augustine used it even before Descartes).

Heidegger, in our time, has traced the history of the failure of the absolute beginning of a philosophy which asserts that the primordial evidence in human knowledge is “I think”, and the illusory conclusion, “therefore I am”. “I am” is precisely not an epistemological statement nor a logical conclusion, for it is the very presupposition of one’s thinking. The primordial reference

to “I am” as an ontological statement rather than to “I think” as an epistemological statement is, then, a first step.

A second step is to ask where precisely, I am. Heidegger’s apparently simple answer is that I am simply “there”; and this is the beginning of his ontological analysis of how it is that I am there, and what is the mode of my being there. The impossibility of an absolute beginning entails the impossibility of a presuppositionless beginning, since we can at least recognize the primordial reference to being in all knowledge and affirmation.

Philosophy can then be defined as a reflection upon the pre-reflexive, pre-philosophical, pre-scientific experiencing of being, that is, upon experiencing before any kind of conscious thematization. If philosophy is a radical and transcendental thinking, that is, a thinking upon the a priori conditions of possibility of all thinking and all experiencing, then the experiencing which is reflected upon must be experiencing in the largest sense. It is the experiencing in my insertion of being – concretely, the experiencing of myself and the other in the world” (Dagenais, 1972).

1. Philosophical Anthropology: a consistent overall vision of man and his world

This definition can largely be derived from a study of the basic tenets of the relationship between philosophy and the sciences, in particular the philosophy of man and the social sciences in *Models of man, A phenomenological Critique of Some Paradigms in the Human Sciences* by Jim Dagenais, from which, in a nutshell, the following hypotheses are borrowed:

The thesis maintained is that the human sciences, as sciences, must attempt to reduce the meaning of man to the control of the scientific presuppositions which found each science, and that, in consequence, each scientific model can and must pretend to universal exclusiveness. Furthermore, since each science must be limited to one perspective, they cannot all be summed up under the control of another science, such as philosophy. This amounts to saying that the sciences (positive, axiomatic, or humanistic) must be autonomous as sciences; that the only critique of them as sciences is from within the sciences themselves. Any other knowledge we have of human beings outside of these sciences is, in respect to them, unscientific (Dagenais, 1972).

Dagenais then gives three possible answers to the question “...how we know human being...”, of which he explicitly chooses the second one:

“First, ... through the sciences of man.... But, again, each of these sciences is autonomous and independent ... Second, we might hypothesize that we know man through a “definition” of man. But then the elaboration of an all-encompassing theory about human being would have to depend upon all the empirical sciences anyway. Otherwise, it would have only the

apodicticity of a logically necessary statement. That is, if it is to be about real human beings, such a theory will have to depend upon a host of extra-systematic assumptions which will serve only to invalidate the supposed logical consistency of the argument. Third, ... through a prestructured “metaphysical system” of the whole.... This really makes the sciences of man unnecessary and gratuitous, and explains nothing about the origin of the system in any case.”

Ultimately, he comes to the conclusion that “[i]n all these inadequate hypotheses there is one recognizable constant: that all understanding of human being in the world, whether scientific or philosophical, is founded upon a pre-scientific and pre-philosophical experiencing of human beings as self-and-other-in-the-world. The only alternative, then, is a critical explicitation of this experiencing; and that is the task of philosophy. It is the task undertaken in this essay, especially in the important and basic defense of the second phase of the thesis stated above.”

He describes “the present status of philosophical anthropology” as follows: “It is difficult to write on a subject which hardly exists, except in the spirits of its practitioners” (Bakker, 1981). “In the English-speaking world there are no Chairs of Philosophical Anthropology, and courses with the title are rare. The philosopher, it seems, has some reason to expect the accusation poaching in the fields of the “true” anthropologist, or economist, or what-have-you, since he shares the data of their sciences with them” (Buytendijk, 1965).

“The notion of a philosophical anthropology did not spring into existence suddenly, without antecedents. The subject is an outgrowth of what used to be called, in some circles, ‘philosophical psychology’, and more recently, ‘the philosophy of man’. Philosophical psychology was an outgrowth of the Scholastic enterprise of ‘rational psychology’, a manual treatment of the peculiarly epistemological and psychological works of Thomas Aquinas (for example, the treatise of *de Veritate*, or the commentaries upon Aristotle’s *de Anima*). In the course of time, the manuals were retouched, reorganized or remodeled, keeping the basic Aristotelian and Thomistic orientation, together, often, with the Kantian-Thomistic synthesis of Maréchal. Lonergan, Coreth, Rahner, Lotz and Donceel, among others, have been the guiding lights of this movement in modern times; but the movement, with all its accretions, its growing respect for ‘existentialism’ and ‘phenomenology’, its increasing abandonment of antiquated terminology, still searches for ‘what makes man properly man’, perhaps for an ‘essence’.

But in the context of the ‘*philosophia perennis*’, in which essence is constituted through genus and specific difference, the old definition of man as ‘rational animal’ no longer suffices, and the effort at explicating the definition with the help of modern scientific experimentation succeeds only in demonstrating the inadequacy of the original definition. For example, Joseph Donceel’s completeness and universality; any knowledge that we might have of ‘man’ outside of the knowledge that we have of him in any of these sciences is simply ‘unscientific’ from the point of view of the science involved. The option of the present book is that the final explanation

of ‘man’ lies outside of *all* the possible scientific views of him because it lies within the *origins* of any and all the sciences, including the science of philosophy” (Bakker, 1984).

The currently fashionable models of man appear to some to be reductivist (the ‘nothing but’ type of explanation); but, in fact, we cannot expect them to be anything else. Such models, through their own coherence and rigor of the methods which in their elaboration, make a claim to ultimacy, and we had to take them seriously. It is difficult to impress the importance of this view upon beginners in philosophy; we owe to Edmund Husserl, in his operation of the ‘transcendental reduction’, and his ‘bracketing of the world of the *natural attitude*’, the sole possibility we have of bringing to consciousness the realization that we possess a non-scientific pre-knowledge of our world and of ourselves which we are explicating through our objective scientific endeavors. Without the transcendental focus, such consciousness would simply ‘go without saying’, and we would never have explicit knowledge that there is the possibility of reflection” (Bakker, 1984), “and consequently, the ‘objective view’ of the universe which we have scientifically would be the only one possible.

There is, then, a series of questions which must be answered here, or at least a series of problems which must be clearly distinguished. The first question is one of perspective. It was said above that ‘many sciences studies man’. Traditionally speaking, each of these sciences chooses a perspective which constitutes the ‘formal object’ of the science in question. There is thus one clue provided for the success of the enterprise of philosophical anthropology: there is only one object, properly speaking, the ‘material object’, man himself. But the initial problem also arises here; a material object cannot be studied ‘in itself’, but only under the modality of some formal perspective.

Consequently, to carry out the implications of the task, it seems that one must add that this one object should be treated from all possible points of view. True enough, and that will make the enterprise a truly interdisciplinary one” (Bakker, 1984). “However, one must be careful not to reintroduce incoherence through eclecticism, that is, by adopting simultaneously incompatible or contradictory points of view. This, in my opinion, is the heart of the problem, and the precise fault of the ‘human sciences’, taken as an agglomerate, today.

Is it, then, possible, as an alternative problematic, to lay the groundwork for a philosophy of man which can, in turn, serve as a groundwork for the sciences of man by uncovering the vectors determining the horizon within which the data are accessible? Such a project is indeed possible, since, in any case, philosophical presuppositions (unexplicated evidence) lie at the origin of all sciences. But the assertion of this possibility carries a *proviso*: Provided philosophy itself be included in the class of sciences obliged to clarify their own presuppositions and to justify them. If philosophers can be clear about their own presuppositions, and justify them, they shall have a coherent basis upon which to launch a critical study of the various claims to define man, the

basic presuppositions of such a philosophy of man may serve as a unifying ‘point of view’ which informs all the perspectives upon man without compromising the methodologies and formal aspects proper to each one.”

2. Humanism: a philosophy of man championed by Jaap van Praag (1911–1981) and Reinout Bakker (1920-1987), both following in the footsteps of Dagenais

What Jim Dagenais put forward in his *Models of Man* had been expressed in broad lines in Jaap van Praag’s earlier inaugural speech on humanism as endowed professor of humanism and anthropology of humanism at Leiden University on behalf of the Socrates Foundation of the Dutch Humanist League in 1965:

We might perhaps best characterize humanism by pointing to the attitude of mind that precedes all theory and practice. The term attitude of mind comprises an element of mental orientation, of awareness of duty. This is where all that which is shared in humanism resides: being seized of a fundamental truth of life; adopting this starting point that goes before every philosophy, or world view, or attitude to life. A person may hold a certain view, but an attitude of mind characterises a person’s being. Together with the representation of human beings and the world, which have their origins in this starting point, it constitutes man’s philosophy of life. A philosophy of life, then, is a complex of representations for which a particular attitude of mind is the starting point for a world view and a view of man (Russell, 1970. 452- 453).

Humanistics involves reasoning through the humanist philosophy of life itself. It contemplates a philosophical pursuit. However, it must do justice to the many and varied philosophical interpretations of humanism, which in itself is also remarkably multiform. And so, it will come down to uncovering, wherever possible, the elements that make up the core of all humanism. In other words: it is a search for the underlying tenets of humanism. And humanistics involves reasoning through the humanist philosophy of life from a phenomenological point of view (Gasenbeek, 2006).

In his farewell lecture in 1979 he put this in more concrete terms in the following formulation, which is based in part on the text of Dagenais, primarily concerning “the final explanation of man”:

In an instructive book, a certain Dagenais attempted to investigate how the scientific models of man related to psychology and sociology; he started with Wundt and Durkheim as representatives of the ‘objective’ and Brentano and Weber as representatives of the ‘subjective’

school of thought. ‘The option of the present book’, he wrote, ‘is that the final explanation of “man” lies outside of all the possible scientific views of him because it lies within the origins of any and all the sciences, including the science of philosophy’ (Bakker, 1984). ‘If it now appears that the philosophy of man, even cleansed of its dogmas, cannot work without presuppositions, then after all philosophy is best equipped to achieve some clarity as to his own presuppositions. In this final analysis, perhaps “option” is the best word to use when choosing a perspective for philosophy, and “attitude” is the best term for its method’. And with these quotations we are back at our starting point: the foundations of thinking about man and his world”, which are “the mental attitudes and the postulated models of them” (cf. my Core Concepts) “that can serve as orientation patterns”, of which “the constructive capacity can become apparent: their capacity to appreciate and to criticize starting positions, for example in the sciences” (cf. my Dialogues 1-7). “This seems to me to be a task of philosophical anthropology as well. Philosophical anthropology can thus be of service to the entire range of knowledge of a university (Dassen, 2023& 2024).

3. Reinout Bakker

In his reflections on philosophical anthropology, Reinout Bakker nowhere refers directly to Jim Dagenais. However, he does refer twice to Jaap van Praag: in his *Wijsgerige antropologie van de 20ste eeuw* (2) (4) and in his farewell speech (4), in which he included verbatim part of a quote from Dagenais cited by Van Praag, particularly in relation to “the final explanation of man”:

In the Introduction to the first part, he gives the following explication:

I just used the term ‘view of man’. It is impossible to avoid giving a provisional and broad description of what, in my view, is the essence of anthropology, a sort of working hypothesis, which must be tested over and over again using the research questions of this century. It reads: Philosophical anthropology is a part of philosophical thought that deals with the question of man, man as a unity of body, soul and mind, man in relation to himself, the other, society, the world and God. It cannot be practised without the help of human sciences such as psychology, educational theory and sociology; in short, it can only be discussed in an interdisciplinary sense. It should be pointed out that philosophical anthropology must be distinguished from other forms of anthropology, such as biological and cultural anthropology. They will be discussed now and then in this study because they show a good deal of overlap with philosophical anthropology. But what defines the character of philosophical anthropology in comparison to the other forms is the specific fact that it takes its theme and seeks that which constitutes our typical human being-ness in statements that are presumed to be true and accepted as taken for granted in man’s knowledge by biological and cultural anthropology as well as by many sciences (Russell, 1970, 253). Because of this, philosophical anthropology is a domain unto itself, and cannot be

replaced by any other anthropology. In other words: the final explanation of man lies outside all possible scientific views of man that have ever been formulated, because it lies within the origins of every branch of science, including the science of philosophy. ‘Philosophical anthropology is neutral’, according to Van Praag, ‘in that it does not aim to defend a dogma and even less to serve as propaganda for a conviction, but it can scrutinize its own convictions and starting points as well as those of other disciplines, although here a person’s own conviction inevitably remains his starting point’ (Roessler, 2005). “It is for this reason that I tend to regard philosophical anthropology as a sort of transcendental philosophy because it is the final ground on which the philosophies, of any nature whatsoever, can be practised implicitly or explicitly.

In his farewell speech he summarized the entire complex of factors that constitute philosophical anthropology:

Philosophical anthropology is a domain unto itself, and cannot be replaced by any other anthropology. The final explanation of man lies outside all possible scientific views that have ever been formulated, because they lie within the origins of every branch of science, including the science of philosophy. It is the final ground on which the philosophies, of any nature whatsoever, can be practised implicitly or explicitly (See R. Bakker. *Wijsgerige antropologie van de twintigste eeuw*. Assen, 2 1982, 3; cf. J. van Praag *Levensovertuiging, filosofie en wetenschap*, 1979) (Bakker, 1984).

In my inaugural speech of 25 January 1965, I spoke of the necessary collaboration between philosophy and science. Philosophy without contact with the empirical sciences is empty, but also: the empirical sciences are blind without the contribution of philosophy. If one of these two poles is made absolute, the danger of gross onesidedness, or even distortion, is imminent. The fact that the ultimate questions about man are so rarely asked stems from the practice of giving the scientific foundation of philosophy an absolute status. Many phenomenologists and existentialists have warned against such scientism.

The methods of a post-modern philosophical anthropology will have to be based on reflection, on the claim that it is possible to debate differences and contrasts on reasoned grounds, and on the individual responsibility for the decisions we all make for ourselves in respect of changes in body and mind. A post-modern version of Sartre’s creed: man is and always will be what he makes of himself.”

4. Dagenais and Chan-fai Cheung

“Max Scheler, in his *Man’s Place in Nature*, maintains that there are three most fundamental ideas of man in Western history: man is understood as a rational animal in the Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle; as a creature created by God in His image from the Jewish-Christian

tradition, and finally as the recent product of animal evolution. In traditional Chinese culture, the dominant ideas of man may be limited to two: the Confucian moral man and the Daoist natural man. Taking the two traditions as a whole, we have therefore two more basic ideas of man to be added to Scheler's list: in addition to the philosophical, the theological and the scientific, there are the moral and finally the natural (Daoist) man. These ideas cannot be all true since they are in fact incompatible with one another in their fundamental philosophical tenets. There is simply no unified idea of man. Here is where Heidegger's critique comes in. Although his "phenomenological destruction" of the metaphysics is only directed to the Western tradition, his critique of the metaphysical basis of the very conception of human nature is, in my opinion, trans-cultural", in the words of Dr. Cheung Chan Fai, professor of philosophy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in his *Human Nature and Human Existence – On the Problem of the Distinction Between Man and Animal* (Cheung, 2001).

After he establishes what Heidegger "has written in Chapter 9 of Being and Time: 'The "essence" (*Wesen*) of Dasein lies in its existence (*Existenz*)"', his final opinion is that "the major issue is to understand what human being is. Any metaphysical distinction of man drawn from a comparison between man and animals does not really think of man as man in his Being. 'Metaphysics thinks of man on the basis of *animalitas* and does not think in the direction of his *humanitas*'", citing Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*; "[t]he *essentia* (*Wesen*) of man does not point to the substantia, the whatness, in man. 'Wesen' means the disclosing process of the understanding of Being (*Seinsverständnis*) in the human Dasein. 'Wesen' - essence – in this sense refers not to the what but the how of Dasein with respect to its 'existence'. The comparison of Aristotle with Xunzi and with Mencius is to show the similar approaches to the question of man, though the two great Confucians place the primacy of the human nature on the moral awareness and its actualization. These two ideas from Aristotle and the Confucians have been the most important for all subsequent theories of man. Heidegger's philosophy has changed all these. The distinction of man from animals should not be sought in human nature but in the meaning of human existence in the light of Being."

The distinction between man and animals as the basis for his study and his invocation of the biological anthropologist Max Scheler immediately earns him some measured criticism from Reinout Bakker (1984):

Scheler did not see that philosophical anthropology is an integrational philosophical discipline, in which metaphysics must be consistently excommunicated from the mind. Because it is not useful in a scientific sense. The study of man in comparison with animals, prominent in the first half of the 20th century, no longer yields up any meaningful results. The 'added value' of man is not expressed in this comparative study. The required

empirical method cannot respond to this factor, because it cannot be tested empirically. And how can one in fact start from a comparison between man and animals if the particular character of the actual comparison is not assessed at the same time? If one wishes to demonstrate that man is fundamentally superior to animals, then one must assume that this can only be proved by means of reflections of man on himself, reflections on the basis of which man is aware of himself as an 'I' that can study both himself and animals.

In respect of Dagenais's *Models of Man* (1) Cheung remarks: "There are indeed many more different theories of man not only within philosophy but also in modern social sciences. Sociology, psychology and anthropology all propose different empirical theories of man, in contrast to the *speculative* ideas in philosophy. The modern discipline of philosophical anthropology is devoted to the synthesis of speculative and empirical theories", only to conclude that "[t]he arguments between all these theories of human nature seem to rest on the justification of the primordially of the human essence in question." Even after a comprehensive discussion of Max Scheler's *Spirit and Person*, he again reaches the conclusion that "[t]here is still no unified theory of man". This naturally also applies to the solution which he has chosen, namely "the meaning of human existence in the light of Being" as the basis for "the distinction of man from animals."

But if we sever the link between these two, then what we retain is "the meaning of human existence in the light of Being", which is precisely what Dagenais says at the end of his essay, where he cites Husserl: "The present proposal is to define human consciousness, with Husserl, not as a thing but as a giver of meaning, and to define man in a preliminary way not as a 'rational animal' but as essentially project and as incarnate freedom." (My Core Concepts, Essential (Relative Freedom))

They thus take different paths to arrive at the same conclusion, the difference being that Dagenais adds an essential element, incarnate freedom, of which he gives a comprehensive explanation, which is the answer to the question of "what makes man properly man", as described in his *Models of Man*.

In this work, Dagenais laid the theoretical foundation for a new philosophy of man, or philosophical anthropology, but he also explicitly said that it needed to be elaborated in a practical (i.e. concrete) sense: "With this perspective, I think, the *de facto* intention of both project and emergence can be determined (I do not say it is an easy task!), and deviations from the hopes incarnated in the project, whether due to fault or fallibility, can be uncovered." (My Core Concepts) (Dassen, 2023& 2024).

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