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SELF AND OTHER: REMARKS ON HUMAN NATURE AND HUMAN CULTURE*

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Abstract: *Demarcation of nature from culture is based on the dialogical polarity of first and second person constitutive of human beings. By means of the ancient categories of doing (I-role, i.e., Self) and suffering (You-role, i.e., Other) it is possible to capture conceptually the process of self-education as comprising both individuation and socialization on the level of non-verbal activity (man as a social animal) as well as on the level of verbal activity (man as a rational animal). As a consequence, the clash between the two theories of the cultural process that govern our intellectual history – is it a process of progress or one of decline? – which is exhibited as the background feeding especially the present day controversy between communitarianism (being a version of romantic individualism) and liberalism (being a version of enlightened universalism) will be resolved.*

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The present widespread interest in problems of intercultural and intracultural communication, disputes being its paradigm case, is certainly symptomatic of a particular feature of the very historical situation we

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belong to. We live in a period of growing consciousness that the belief in just one uniquely determined reality, the world of matters and the world of manners, which has governed our Western intellectual history almost unchallenged up to the last century, is unwarranted. It has become impossible to avoid facing more than one, obviously equally plausible though incompatible, set of rules for a way of life, and the same holds with respect to the mentally represented structures which we call a world view. The resulting skepticism may well belong to the sources that are responsible for the rise of all kinds of fundamentalism which herald parochial views and values and try to spread them worldwide as an alleged antidote to the formal character of global culture. Fundamentalists suspect that the idea of a universal global culture is nothing but a claim for what may be called the scientific world view and they are afraid of a liberal way of life that relegates common views and values to procedural ones of handling diverging claims.

Further complications enter this picture if another fact is taken into account. It is certainly not impossible to change ways of life considerably and equally well to advocate different world views. Changes in the way of life may be brought about under outside influence, politically enforced or encouraged, for example; but likewise under inside influence, for example by self-indoctrination or by deliberate decision and practice. Diverging world views are voiced in the case when, at alternate times, you lead the life of a scientist and of an artist, or when you have learned to participate in divergent cultural traditions; it may also happen when, due to certain events, one has changed one's course of life radically, has turned from Saul into Paul, for example. The views and values of an individual not only change through time, they also change according to the situation without necessarily exhibiting a stable kernel that, in our tradition, is considered to be an essential prerequisite for being allowed to call somebody a fully grown-up person. It seems as if

we should be prepared to face, on the one hand, internally unconnected sequences of world views and ways of life without any *tertium comparationis* to mediate between them, and, on the other hand, proliferations among world views and ways of life without a common ancestry.

To get a better perspective on the various questions involved it is advisable to turn to a short historical retrospection. There is a document where the idea of becoming human is spelled out in terms of a cultural process which starts from a state of nature. In fact, it is a myth, attributed by Plato to the sophist Protagoras and recounted to us in his dialogue *Protagoras* (320c8-323c2). There, we read that human beings come into existence by two distinct steps. At first, technical abilities were acquired in order to compensate for natural deficiencies; these abilities appear individually as a character of the species and make its members capable of surviving collectively as natural beings. The whole realm of τέχναι which includes the arts as well as religious rites is available on this level. After that, a second step is taken which leads to practical abilities that provide for units of self-government, individually as well as socially, and which has to be understood as the advent of rationality. On this second level it is honesty or justness (δίκη) and modesty or respect (αἰδώς) which make up solidarity (φιλία).

Practical abilities, if understood in this way, arise from mutual recognition among individual human beings and, therefore, they are dependent on language. They cannot be exercised except through individual distinction and social coherence. Any such individual is leading a life governed by reason. They are an animal on the first level and they become a rational one on the second level. Thus, we have identified the backbone that is necessary for guaranteeing the original equivalence of the two ancient definitions of man: *animal rationale* (ζῷον λόγον ἔχον)

and *animal sociale* (ζῷον πολιτικόν). Two additional remarks may be helpful for refining the picture.

Plato, in commenting on the myth, relegates every action which belongs to the sphere of the first step, that is, which is poetical and therefore non-rational or not-yet-rational, to a sphere of merely natural or cultural exigencies. Such an action is not specifically human. Furthermore, he divides rational activity, i.e., the actions which belong to the sphere of the second step, into those which judge claims to mathematical knowledge and those which enact claims to political knowledge (*Politikos* 258e-261a). The move from the first step to the second may be interpreted as a move from amoral competitive behaviour to the more developed stage of moral cooperative behaviour, provided one does not forget that the notion of rationality as the characteristic feature of practical abilities is not limited to the area of moral (and political) legislation but includes the area of scientific judgments as well, that is, those concerning matters which can be taught and learnt (τὰ μαθηήματα).

The second remark concerns an additional distinction which is due to Aristotle. It is the distinction between rationality as the ability to theorize and sociality as the ability to lead a good life which, on the one hand, mirrors the previous Platonic classification among practical abilities, and, on the other hand, allows us to look at the two levels of Protagoras' myth from another angle. Eventually, in Aristotle's philosophical constructions, the additional distinction leads to a different though related developmental bifurcation with an intermediate step. We are confronted with a primary level of mere acting which should rather be called behaviour, and with a secondary level of deliberate activity, that is, actions guided or at least accompanied by thinking where theory serves practice. And, in addition, there is a level in between the other two where poetical activity serves particular cultural needs above the

behaviour necessary for natural survival and below action guided by reason peculiar to man. And it is the stage arrived at in this intermediate level where both the competitive activity of the primary level and the cooperative activity of the secondary level interact and keep the cultural process going.

With this in mind it is easier to understand why there has been so much discussion recently about the thesis, put forward, e.g., by Samuel P. Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations*, that conflicts nowadays should no longer be understood as conflicts between different national states or units, but as conflicts between different cultures. It reflects the widespread influence of the very picture of the cultural process derived from antiquity in the way just sketched, and which is still the dominant picture due to the additional support that it received from the Enlightenment with its slogan of the 'Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts' coined by Lessing in 1780. We may call it the progress-theory of the cultural process where the progress is measured in terms of complexity of (group-)organisation with Hobbes' assumption of a *bellum omnium contra omnes* as the characterizing feature of the initial stage, that is, the state of nature. The individuals count as members of a species which will eventually be fully governed by reason. Privileged documents for a development along this line are the constitutions designed to elicit potentially universal acceptance. Political universalism, the idea of Enlightenment, takes national states to be constitutional states, and unpeaceful fights among them count as signs of the initial barbaric stage which has not yet been overcome.

Yet, we should be prepared to take an alternate picture of the cultural process into account that conflicts with the previous one and has come down to us from antiquity, too. This is of special importance, because its growing influence may be recognized everywhere. It is described in terms of a decline-theory rather than a progress-theory. On

the basis of an *aetas aurea*, a natural state of paradisaical existence of which Hesiod had sung and which Rousseau had described anew, an ever increasing consciousness develops and spoils the ability to act spontaneously. Natural individual creativity is hampered by social pressures which derive from conscious activity for and against others, and the decline can be measured by the losses in (self-)production, that is, by the amount of creative potentials of individuals that remains unrealized. Only the free association of individuals as given in natural ethnic groups defined by a common frame of world views and of ways of life, that is, a culture, allows for uninhibited self-expression. Cultural particularism, the idea of romanticism, argues for national states to be ethnic states designed to fight for their cultural survival. Rather than moving from barbaric competition to civilized cooperation, as cultural process is viewed in progress-theories, we have in this case the call to reverse the cultural process which leads, according to decline-theorists, from natural cooperation, possibly including cooperation with non-human nature as well, to cultural competition.

Underlying these two theories of the cultural process we find two competing notions of culture – or rather two competing attempts to define the boundaries between natural and cultural aspects of being human. In the progress-theory, the claim is made that universalizing reason is the final destiny of man. In the decline-theory, the claim is made that particularizing nature is the primordial ruling force. In order to mediate between these two views regarding human nature and human culture a thorough scrutiny of the dialogic nature of man is called for. As Self, man is subject to doing, as Other to suffering, and neither of these two roles, the active one of doing something while doing it, and the passive one of experiencing what one is doing while doing it, can be reduced to just one of them. But, before embarking on this analysis,

which I have carried out in detail in other papers¹ that elaborate on the ideas developed in my *Einführung in die Philosophische Anthropologie*, it is worth taking a further look at the historical setting of the two ways of demarcating culture from nature.

According to the Enlightenment, the prospect of cultural development defines the proper second nature of man, whereas, according to romanticism, a natural potential acts as the cause of the true culture within the one and first nature of man. It seems as if among the premisses of Enlightenment we have to include the belief in reason within history as *ultima ratio*, usually called the belief in historical progress, and correspondingly, in romanticism there seems to exist a belief in God in nature as *prima causa* that, in non-theological terms, is called the belief in natural evolution, including evolutionary epistemology as promoted by some scholars nowadays.² As to the last case of evolutionary epistemology we should be aware that it is an attempt even to dispense with the Enlightenment view altogether. All human

¹Among others: Artikulation und Prädikation, in: M. Dascal, D. Gerhardus, K. Lorenz and G. Meggle (eds.), *Sprachphilosophie-Philosophy of Language-La philosophie du langage. Ein internationales Handbuch zeitgenössischer Forschung-An International Handbook of Contemporary Research-Manuel international des recherches contemporaines*, vol. 2 (Berlin/New York 1995), 1098-1122; Rede zwischen Aktion und Kognition, in: A. Burri (ed.), *Sprache und Denken. Language and Thought* (Berlin/New York 1997), 139-156; Sinnbestimmung und Geltungssicherung. Ein Beitrag zur Sprachlogik, in: G.-L. Lueken (Hg.), *Formen der Argumentation* (Leipzig 2000), 87-106; Dynamis und Energeia. Zur Aktualität eines begrifflichen Werkzeugs von Aristoteles, in: T. Buchheim, C.H. Kneepkens and K. Lorenz (eds.), *Potentialität und Possibilität. Modalaussagen in der Geschichte der Metaphysik*, (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 2001), 349-368; Pragmatic and Semiotic Prerequisites for Predication. A Dialogue Model, (to appear).

² Cf. the critical review in: G. Wolters, Evolutionäre Erkenntnistheorie – eine Polemik, *Vierteljahrsschrift der Naturforschenden Gesellschaft in Zürich* 133 (1988), 125-142.

interference with natural evolution, and the acquisition of knowledge should be treated as such, is interpreted as a part of natural evolution. Such a move runs counter to the classical idea of natural history to be understood as the deployment of reason³ – a modern version is radical constructivism as based on the concept of autopoiesis⁴ – with its consequence of embedding the romantic view in the Enlightenment one rather than conversely.

These remarks should not be read as an attempt to start a discussion of the relative merits of romantic individualism and of Enlightenment universalism. With these latter characterizations one misses the point. Rather, we should take note of the following awkward turns. The romantic slogan ‘back to nature’, in fact already *en vogue* in antiquity with the Stoics: *secundum naturam vivere*, works as a kind of universal norm asking everybody for his or her respective engagement, e.g., in the ecological movement, and the enlightened call for a self-determined way of life gives rise to a multitude of essentially dissociated life-plans, as is well-known when observing, e.g., the modern phenomenon of yuppyism. Romantic individualism tends to become a version of communitarianism with its pledge that the community should have primacy over the individual, whereas enlightened universalism shows up as a kind of liberalism dependent on the primacy of the individual over the community.

Both approaches suffer from intrinsic inconsistencies, and it is basically this ambiguous setting which is responsible for feeding contemporary debates like, e.g., the debate on communitarianism versus

³ Cf. the philosophical reconstructions in: N. Rao, *Culture as Learnables. An Outline for a Research on the Inherited Traditions*, Saarbrücken 1999

⁴ Cf. H.R. Maturana & F.J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*, Boston 1979.

liberalism with its focus on how to defend or to attack ethnocentrism,⁵ that is, the particularity of value-systems, or the debate on the content and scope of human rights with its focus on how to identify universal values,⁶ if there is such a thing with an identity across cultures.

We seem to be caught in an age-old dispute occurring in our own Western tradition with its roots in antiquity on how to define the relation between individual and society. What is the difference between juxtaposing an individual human being with his or her membership in the species man on the one hand, and with his or her being a part of mankind on the other hand? Does it make a difference when in the first case an individual is understood to be endowed with the faculty of acting and speaking as a representative of any other individual, that is, of acting and speaking trans-subjectively, this is the precise meaning of the traditional notion of 'having reason' or 'to be able to reason' (man as an *animal rationale*), and when in the second case an individual is taken to be a particular contribution, by his or her share in verbal and non-verbal activity, to the subsistence of mankind as a whole – this may be taken to be the meaning of the traditional notion of 'being social' (man as an *animal sociale*)?

Of course, in both cases, when acting as a universal representative and when participating in mankind's subsistence, actual activities will fulfill their aims only with respect to particular groups, though in the first case this limitation is judged negatively, because real objectivity is said to

⁵ Cf. M. Brocker & H.H. Nau (eds.), *Ethnozentrismus. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen des interkulturellen Dialogs* (Darmstadt 1997), H. Steinmann and A. Scherer (eds.) *Zwischen Universalismus und Relativismus* (Frankfurt a. M. 1998).

⁶ Cf. J.-F. Lyotard, *Le différend* (Paris 1983), A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edn. (London 1985), and O. Höffe, *Politische Gerechtigkeit. Grundlegung einer kritischen Philosophie von Recht und Staat* (Frankfurt a.M. 1987).

have not yet been achieved, whereas in the second case the limitation is judged positively, because participation is said to work only within identified groups to which an individual consciously belongs.

In the first case we are faced with the opposition 'individual-universal', in the second case with the opposition 'individual-social'. In both cases, however, it is obvious that competitive behaviour is judged to be inferior to cooperative behaviour. In fact, both these cases can be treated as consequences, respectively, of two basic traditional assumptions which contradict each other. The first assumption amounts to the simple claim that man is by nature bad. It acts as a presupposition for progress-theories of the cultural process, whence the negative judgment on any limitation with respect to acting as a universal representative. The second assumption may be abbreviated to the opposite claim that man is by nature good. This is the basic presupposition of decline-theories of the cultural process, whence the positive judgment on the limitations of participating in mankind's subsistence. Entering into a debate on the acceptability of either presupposition would enforce an engagement in moral preoccupations and convictions, an endeavour whose outcome is uncertain. Instead, looking at basic human needs appears to be a more promising approach.

One who tries to reach a better understanding of how human beings relate to each other, will have to face two incompatible basic needs, the one to be close to one another and the other to keep a distance from each other. In order to elucidate this phenomenon I propose to take a closer look at the work of an author who discusses the content and scope as well as the mutual relations and presuppositions of the two competing theories of the cultural process. He does this with an explicit awareness that both the predicates 'good' and 'bad' and their theoretical analogues 'true' and 'false' should not be used descriptively but reflexively. They do not refer to properties of empirical sentences

about given objects, but act as reflexive terms for passing philosophical judgments while reconstructing, i.e., delineating conceptually, the objects in question. The author I am referring to is Johann Gottfried Herder. He seems to have been the first person in history to have become aware of the conceptual rather than empirical relation which holds between the two characterizations of human beings occurring in Protagoras' myth.⁷ Human beings are, on the one hand, deficient beings insofar as they lack sufficient protection against inanimate nature and do not possess effective weapons against animals, and, on the other hand, this means that they are proficient beings insofar as they have both poetical and practical abilities which are acquired consecutively by the two steps in the myth. The terms Herder uses to refer to poetical and practical abilities, respectively, are 'freedom' and 'reason'. You possess freedom which will eventually yield peace, and you possess reason which will eventually yield justice. Both have to be acquired and should not be treated as just being there.

It is by exercising these abilities that humans define their deficiencies, and, therefore, it is wrong to treat the relation between proficiency and deficiency as an empirical one of compensation. The point becomes still clearer, if we turn to the details of the interdependence between being proficient and being deficient.

Herder defines the cultural process neither by progress nor by decline but by a process of education. He uses a dialogue model of teaching and learning where teaching includes constructions of representations, and learning, correspondingly, includes deconstructions

⁷ Elaborated in his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit. Erster Teil* (1784), *Zweiter Teil* (1785), as well as in his *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772); additional discussions are contained in his *Verstand und Erfahrung, Vernunft und Sprache. Eine Metakritik zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1799).

by means of interpretations up to concrete activity. The dialogue model is used as a means to identify items of a cultural process in as much as both doing and suffering – here, the two roles of Self and Other appear in their basic setting as the two roles of a teaching and learning process – always occur together. And it becomes clear that the categories of doing and suffering govern not only the realm of verbal activity but also the realm of non-verbal activity. Now, as every individual human being plays both roles empirically – he or she is learning as well as teaching, possibly at different moments in his or her lifetime – it is individual distinction together with social coherence, that is, competitiveness against a common background and cooperativeness split up into different approaches, which defines the process of education.

Reason, being basically the ability to *organize* which includes being able to handle problems of representation, and freedom, being basically the ability to *produce* and, therefore, to tackle problems of presentation, appear, when exercised, on the side of doing as proficiency and on the side of suffering as deficiency. On the basis of this, Herder is able to explain why tradition may include errors – a deficiency of reason – and why something evil may occur among the items somebody chooses – a deficiency of freedom. The difference of such an account from an understanding of competition merely as fixing and pursuing individual interests and of cooperation merely as establishing and pursuing common interests is obvious. Whoever tries to understand sociality and rationality in terms of individual and common interests, respectively, has turned the reflexive use of sociality and rationality, which up to Aristotle was the outcome of a self-characterization of humans, into the ordinary positive use of describing pre-existing properties of humans.

It was Hannah Arendt who first clearly demonstrated how, by translating the Greek term ‘πολιτικόν’ by the Latin term ‘*socialis*’, the change in reading the meaning of sociality positively instead of reflexively

has led to a conceptual confusion throughout our tradition up until now.⁸ But, it was not this fact alone which had such an effect. In addition to it, one has to take into account another important feature due to the Stoic replacement of ‘πολιτικόν’ by ‘κοινόν’. Sociality was no longer restricted to the second Protagorean level of reason-guided ways of living but is understood as pervading the first level of natural abilities too.

It is this accidental insight brought about by a conceptual confusion during *translatio studii* together with the complementary recognition that rationality – in its full sense and not in the confined sense of means-end-rationality – is required for exercising first-level poetical activities which made Herder confident of being right in reestablishing the reflexive use of sociality and rationality, but now throughout the whole range of human activities.

Hence, ‘sociality’ – Herder’s ‘freedom’ – does not refer to the struggle among individual interests whether understood in the intentional setting of a cultural struggle for power or confined to explanations by a causal theory of behaviour to account for the natural Darwinian struggle for survival, but it refers to social coherence both in acting and speaking which is cooperation *by means of* individual contributions. Realizing that everyone must invent his or her own way of life and his or her own world view provides for the possibility of gradual development of sociality which may also be called solidarity in case one wants to use a term more akin to the Greek term ‘φιλία’ (friendship) which had served the same purpose in antiquity as mentioned above.

Likewise, ‘rationality’ – Herder’s ‘reason’ – no longer refers to the ability to act along common interests even if ‘common’ is not restricted to some group interests but refers to fully fledged moral generality.

⁸ Cf. H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago 1958), chap. 4.

Instead, it signifies individual distinction at all levels which is competition *grounded in* a community of acting and speaking. In fact, it is a paradigm case of rational behaviour to compete by argumentation. By successful refutation, for example, you earn a reputation in the scientific community. Realizing how one's own way of living and one's own world view is found amidst shared activities is an accomplishment of another step on the way to individuality.

Traditionally in this context, from antiquity through Kant up to the present, we are accustomed to speak of self-determination as the task of reason; but, as reason is said to be concerned with the universal and not with the particular, self-determination is usually understood as deliberate submission to universal laws and, therefore, as an obligation to create the universal human being – the transcendental Ego in Kant – and not as a universal task to be carried out individually.

It is not difficult to understand why such confusions have occurred. They are an outcome of neglecting the insight that individuality and sociality are but stages in a process which is simultaneously a process of individuation *and* of socialization. This process is the one which had been conceptualized by Herder as the education process (in German: *Bildungsprozess*). Self and Other are bound together and constitute what may be called a dialogical dyad, an entity well known for quite some time in psychoanalysis, for example.⁹

An account of self-determination which starts with a set of ready-made individuals has to postulate preferences and beliefs as additional entities to be possessed by individuals, because otherwise there is no chance either to determine or to explain any of the different competitive

⁹ Cf. among others, the studies on the “Mutter-Kind-Dyade” within primary socialization in: A. Lorenzer, *Die Wahrheit der psychoanalytischen Erkenntnis. Ein historisch-materialistischer Entwurf*. (Frankfurt am Main 1974).

and cooperative relations among individual human beings let alone those of deliberation, negotiation, or arbitration or the like – yet, the burden of proving the existence of those additional entities above and beyond my own preferences and beliefs is shirked.

Within an approach where the existence of individuals is not traced back to a mutually dependent genesis in a process that is simultaneously one of individuation and socialization, there are only *external* – natural or cultural – relations between individuals, i.e., relations of the exertion of influence upon one another. This violates the basic condition connected with the concept of self-determination or autonomy of an individual. Exerting influence upon one another results in heteronomy. The chance of learning from each other and in this sense of being engaged in a process of mutual, and therefore, truly autonomous education which constitutes the realm of *internal* relations among individuals does not even appear.

Of course, the process of education functions as an alternative to the process of exerting influence upon one another only if it is not understood in the descriptive sense which is current at present. Neither education in the intentional framework of given educational aims, nor education in the causal framework of social engineering will be mutual education. Mutual education is a process of self-education in which both sides in the process of teaching and learning change their ways of life and their world views by a further step of both individuation and socialization. Self-education concerns Self with respect to Other and Other with respect to Self depending on whether self-education is seen under the active aspect of doing or the passive aspect of suffering. It is not an individualistic notion but a dialogical one.

Ways of life and world views can be apprehended only if seen in both their individual and in their social aspects; as mentioned above, they show individual distinction and social coherence. Self-education is not

striving for a balance between guiding and letting grow, the educational equivalents to the characterizing activities of the two theories of the cultural process discussed further above: striving for universal culture as the second nature of man and obeying the natural evolution of cultural features within the first and only nature of man. Self-education which, using a formula that does not separate its active and passive aspects, is *mutual* education of Self and Other, and by that very feature an attempt to balance the relation of Self and Other with respect to acting and being acted upon, consists in setting up limits against being influenced.

Setting up such limits proceeds both by standing up against submission to cultural conditioning and by inventing ways of compensation for natural dependencies. In terms of an educational process it is possible to say that being guided is countered by individual acting in making use of individual knowledge or know-how already acquired, whereas growing is countered by invoking social knowledge which is an already acquired knowledge of social norms, i.e., of activity to be shared.

Learning from one another establishes bonds as well as demarcations, and it exhibits such a kind of relation even with respect to two empirical persons each individually: the Other – a not yet known or alien part – within oneself, and the Self – a well known part of oneself – appearing opposite to oneself. It is exactly this kind of radical extension of the concept of Self-Other-dependency to include Self-Other-relations within one empirical person that lends itself to perceptual representation as showing both self-expression for Self and for Other and other-description, again for Self and for Other. In such a way the self-characterization of human beings as belonging to both nature and culture is fully validated. It even becomes clear that the very distinction of nature and culture rests on the process of self-discovery which we

have identified as a process of mutual education of the dialogical dyad: Self and Other.

Individuality, a *differentia* of individuals on the level of reflection, can be recognized only within some common activity; sociality, an equality of individuals on the level of reflection, can be performed only if we are conscious of the different approaches within a given situation. Mutual dependency of Self and Other is by far stronger than it is often thought to be. It is a consequence of the dialogical polarity that is exhibited by the two sides of man's self-discovery: human self-understanding in knowing that we belong to nature – a case of suffering – and human self-determination by acting including sign-acting like speaking, dancing or painting and the like which defines us as cultural beings – a case of doing.

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