

The Persistence of a Certain Question

In the path of his – most brilliantly described – way to himself St. Augustine arrived at the point in which he could only state: “...and I have become a problem to myself, and this is the ailment from which I suffer.”¹ It is well known how and at what price (both intellectual and metaphysical) he found the way out of this deadlock of self-reflection. We also know that the problem he faced is not something what can be solved once and for all. Quite on the contrary, since that moment on it became the most basic predicament of all philosophical thought which attempts at a serious analysis of the human being and at any determination of its nature. Furthermore, this predicament – as it is visible in the above mentioned example – affects not only philosophical reflection, which can always be accused of being abstract and devoid of any vital contact with the realm of genuinely human concerns. It also affects the way we think about ourselves, the way we try to make sense of who we are and to ascribe meaning to different modes of our self-experience.

This was never more visible than in the contemporary culture determined by the highly complex, dynamic and nomadic character; culture marked by the interplay of non-transparent, anonymous and alienating political, social and economic processes and discourses, by the unprecedented mobility of our being in the world, by the growing level of the virtualization of reality. The latter, being especially emblematic of our cultural reality, can be understood in three senses that somehow coincide. First, it indicates the weakening of the strong, traditional, metaphysical categories, such as substance, essence, nature, ground, their more and more problematic character. Second, it confronts us with the increasing role of technological products, which play to the large extent the role of mediators in the process of human self-apprehension. Third, it means that one of the essential characteristics of contemporary culture is the intermixture of what is real and what is imaginary or even purely fictional, up

1) Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), 239.

to the point where it becomes impossible to draw any line of demarcation between these two realms. It seems that people who live in such a cultural universe can get a sense of who they are not by means of reference to some metaphysical ground, or by relying on the stable axiological systems, but rather by the whole series of mediations through more and more ontologically ephemeral externality. One may claim that to take seriously the implications of this cultural diagnosis – so vividly expressed by all theoretical currents grouped under the umbrellas of anti-, post-, and trans-humanism – is to resign, or at least radically rethink, the category of human being. There is no doubt that this category has lost its “natural”, so to speak, and obvious meaning, if any such meaning was ever present in philosophical discourse. But does it necessarily mean that this category has lost all its relevance? One has full right to question it. But if that is so, then from what perspective can we attempt the enigma of this being? Are we still justified in all our efforts at finding its *eidos* or nature?

It is true, however trivial it may sound, that we live in the age of the domination of the imperious scientific world-view, driven by the instrumental rationality that tends to objectify the whole of reality including the realm of cultural meanings and values. This perspective, culminating in the situation described in the best way by the Heideggerian concept of *machination*, presents all beings – including humans – as subject to the control of technological and economic processes, as manipulable, as the means referring to no longer transparent ends. And yet, it is difficult not to notice the strong humane tendency which constantly and tirelessly accentuates the validity and authority of the first-person perspective as well as the need and the possibility of creating meaningful frameworks – however fragile and ephemeral they can be – for human self-understanding and self-realization. This tendency often takes negative forms of longing or nostalgia, which in many cases find their articulations in new ideologies or utopias. Both of them – as we know – can play a positive role of the basis for the acts of self-understanding undertaken from within a particular cultural situation, as well as distorted and pathological forms leading to disintegration, escapism, or fundamentalism. Even more often we are faced with the situation of the impossibility of creating such meaningful frameworks at all. This situation leads either to the complete cultural inertia or to a kind of deadlock to which individuals can only respond with the growing lack of the sense identity and accountability, and in the most extreme cases to the growing disintegration of their selves.

Are these two aforementioned tendencies translatable to each other? Can we see them as the paradoxical mirror-images of each other? Should we try to do it? Or maybe, what I have called the humane perspective is only a kind of always and necessarily belated, and based on the romantic prejudices, re-action to the overwhelming processes which, in fact, can be neither controlled, nor stopped? It would be naïve to expect the ultimate answers to these kind of questions. Instead, we should point at the discursive space which makes possible the appearance of these tendencies and their cultural confrontation. The space which is their condition and at the same time the object of their most vivid interests. I believe that one can quite correctly claim that this space has its proper name – the human being. This claim, however, functions only and exclusively as a pure indication. In any case, we are not closer to answer the question how should we conceive this paradoxical, at once conditioning and conditioned, free and dependent being. In other words, in the contemporary culture the question of human being persistently returns. As such, it is the question which lays foundations for all other questions concerning the realm of cultural meanings (including these posed by the natural sciences). It seems to be the implicit fundament of all other investigations. But are we capable to provide any statement about it which would be at once univocal and universally valid? Furthermore: do we know what we really want to know while posing the question about human being? Do we know what kind of answer would be satisfactory? What kind of approach would be the most appropriate to uncover and present this “implicit fundament”?

It is well known that one of the first explicit formulations of that problem was formulated by Immanuel Kant. In his lectures on logic he brought down the whole field of philosophical knowledge to one simple ques-

tion: “What is the human being?” The question which is to be the opening question of – in his own opinion – the highly problematic discipline, namely philosophical anthropology. For Kant the problem was not so much methodological in nature, but rather concerned the object of analysis, which by its very nature cannot be enclosed within any potential system of objective determinations.

“A systematic doctrine containing our knowledge of man (anthropology) can either be given from a physiological or a pragmatic point of view. Physiological knowledge of man aims at the investigation of what Nature makes of man, whereas pragmatic knowledge of man aims at what man makes, can, or should make of himself as a freely acting being.”²

The problem is whether these two perspectives can be somehow synthesized or at least reconciled. To what extent can man – as a free agent – be seen as the natural being, as the product of nature? Can freedom be seen as a work of nature? Or rather would the opposite statement be more correct? Does the concept of nature itself comprise any kind of normativity or *telos*? If so, how are they related to human being? Or to rephrase these questions in a more phenomenological idiom, is it possible for humans to experience such a reconciliation of the aforementioned perspectives? What form would this experience take and what implications would it have for human self-reflection?

The first issue of our journal, which we are most happy to present, is driven by this kind of questions. Despite the paradoxical character of the impossible discipline called philosophical anthropology, we want to draw attention to the somehow surprising persistence of the anthropological problematics. We want to point at the simple fact that, whether completely worn out and old fashioned, or still relevant and valid, the category of human being and along with it, that of human nature are still present in philosophical reflection. Furthermore, with all ephemerality and ambiguity, these concepts occupy one of the central places within philosophy of culture.

Therefore, the issue begins, a bit provocatively, with the thematic section consisting of the essays explicitly referring to the concept of human nature. Jos de Mul analyzing the transformations of neo-Darwinism uncovers the tragic dimension of human life, where human being not so much escapes biological determinations, but rather finds the genuinely human articulation for them. In this way, as he puts it: it “transforms human nature into humane nature” expressive not of our essence, but of our deepest concerns. This view is complemented by the perspective of Agata Bielik-Robson who shows – after Hegel and psychoanalysis – the possibility of thinking about man as the “living contradiction”, which slips out of modern biopolitical processes of re-naturalization and undertakes the existential adventure of the “antinomian freedom” transgressing the law-governed order of nature.

Our “Forum” consists of the essays which, not directly referring to the concept of human nature, also undertakes the “anthropological” problematic. Most of them are rather concentrated on the modes of human self-givenness within the experiential field. Zofia Rosińska – the Great Teacher of mine and few other members of our Editorial Staff – analyzes the mystical experience, situating it between pathology and supernormality. By using the concept of metarationality Rosińska is not only able to criticize over-simplistic interpretations of the mystical experience, to show its own forms of evidence and cognition, but also to reveal, in a very convincing way, the vertical dimension of human being. The latter seems to guarantee the impossibility of any form of one-sided reductionist approach to human being. Instead, she promotes the apophatic paradigm in thinking about man. The essay by James G. Hart stands in a quite interesting relation to that of Rosińska. He undertakes the genuinely phenomenological analysis of the phenomenon of violence, which provides not only a deep insight into the phenomenon in question culminating in the inspiring category of Luciferism, but also derives from his

2) Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell, (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 3.

analysis the original implications of the phenomenon of violence for our understanding of the *eidōs* of human being, as well as for the phenomenology of the Other. The next essay – by Marija Selak – provides an outline of the possible interpretation of the phenomenon of selfie (more and more emblematic for our culture), in order to show how the development of technological devices mediates the acts of our self-apprehension.

The last two essays by Marcin Poręba and Katarzyna Krempłewska undertake from different perspectives the same problem, that of freedom. Poręba makes the attempt to speculatively ground human freedom in the order of nature, or at least to present it as not necessarily opposed to nature. This point makes his essay an original contribution to the discussion on the subject of one of the questions I posed above – how the system of nature and human freedom can be reconciled with each other. Krempłewska, in turn, tries to show, following Bergson, how human sense of freedom is constitutive for the self and how it is grounded in the anti-reductionist conception of time. In this way, she arrives at the interesting conception of the dynamic essence of human being.

There are twofold implications of most of these essays. First, the perspective presented, or at least implied by the authors, goes in the direction of the apophatic anthropology. In short, that would mean they resign, in principle, from any attempt to grasp the essence of that being *in abstracto*, or by means of pure speculation – that is, by extracting it from the realm of its existence, from the sphere of its acts and experiences. Even within this realm it is given to itself only by means of never-ending de-localizations and re-localizations, of what Helmuth Plessner would call “ex-centric postionality”. It can be expressed in different forms of contesting, negating or transgressing the realm of factuality.

Second, they offer a certain perspective on culture, where it appears not only as the realm of the interplay of non-transparent political, social or economic process, but also of meanings, which are expressive of genuinely human concerns.