

Humanism, Existentialism, Semiotics (Otto Lehto 2007)

1. Humanism and History

Why humanism, still/again? The very same question was asked – not for the first time, nor for the last – by Sartre, in a rhetorical mood, in his 1946 landmark treatise, “L’Existentialisme est un Humanisme,” a work which propounded many of the topics and doctrines that were to become the core of the new French existentialist movement in philosophy and literature. In differentiating “his” philosophy from the other humanist traditions of the time – from those allied with it, like Marxism, to those hostile to it, like Christianity – he chose to define “existentialist” humanism as radically distinct from “essentialist” or “classical” humanism (basically everything pre-Sartre or pre-Existentialism). Humanism he defined as “une theorie qui prend *l’homme comme fin* et comme valeur supérieure” (1970: 91, my emphasis). In his reading of history, this pre-existentialist humanism of his forebears, as represented by Enlightenment’s offspring, unduly emphasized such things as “human nature”, “human rights” (god-given or natural) and social law-likeness – all essentialist, anti-individualistic theories of the human condition. Existentialism wanted to strip away the last vestiges of any essentialist salvaging of the absoluteness of Man’s condition: “l’homme est libre, l’homme est liberté” (36-7); “Nous sommes seuls, sans excuses ... l’homme est condamné à être libre” (37). Instead of history or the social condition being the sculptor of man, it is *man himself* who is the author of his own destiny and of the course of history. Under the subsection “l’homme invente l’homme”, he quotes the poet Francis Ponge: “l’homme est avenir de l’homme” (38), to which Sartre adds: “C’est parfaitement exact” (ibid.).

This “becoming” (cf. Nietzsche), this “liberty” (cf. Liberalism), this “end-in-itself”, this “condition of no excuse”; all this is Man. Following the Protagorean maxim of “man is the

measure of all things”, the existential subject (without essence) makes (without compulsion) an act (without hesitation) that defines him as Man; “[L]’existence précède l’essence” (1970: 17).

Like humanism, he divides existentialism itself into two “schools”: The theological or “Christian” school (K. Jaspers, G. Marcel) on the one hand, and then the “atheist” camp on the other, exemplified by “Heidegger, et aussi les existentialistes français et moi-même” (1970: 17). This is an oversimplification; what about the theological training of the “atheist” Heidegger, for example? At any rate, the passage – “Heidegger, et *aussi...*” – clearly pinpoints the importance of the German thinker at the root of existentialism. Indeed, a humanistic rendering, or interpretation, of Heideggerian philosophy is found, most perceptibly, in Sartre’s “L’Etre et le Néant”, at the basis of whose “phenomenological ontology” is Sartre’s reading and re-reading of “Sein und Zeit” (and Husserl); more on Heidegger later. Sartre himself, a devout non-believer, professes an atheism close to Secular Christianity, not only in utilizing the language of “fallenness”, “bad faith” and “existential Angst” (via Heidegger) and by relying on Kierkegaard and others, but also in Sartre’s re-appropriation of the epistemology and ontology of the transcendental subject: “Il n’y a pas d’autre univers qu’un univers humain, l’univers de la subjectivité humaine. *Cette liaison de la transcendance, comme constitutive de l’homme ... et de la subjectivité ... [C]’est ce que nous appelons l’humanisme existentialiste*” (1970: 93, my emphasis). This “univers humain” is the Humanist Weltanschauung. The humanity of *homo humanus*. “Transcendence”, too, is just another name for Existence. Incidentally, this more or less “Christian” hermeneutic of *existential transcendence*, utilized by Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Jaspers and Ricoeur, finds its way ultimately to Tarasti (2000), who emphasizes transcendence as the movement of Dasein’s self-negation and -affirmation. Now, while Sartre’s atheism is rather theistic and his existentialism is rather essentialistic, his humanism, too, is rather anti-humanistic, in the vein of Nietzsche and Heidegger; his Marxism, however, is authentically Marxist – as authentic as his failure to critically *overcome* humanism’s promises, programmes and pogroms (cf. Stalin and Mao’s “humanist” statesmanship).

So, this Sartre-inspired “existentialist-humanist” post-war Zeitgeist formed loose alliances and sympathetic relations with such traditions as Classical Liberalism, Marxism (later: Maoism), Anarchism, Libertinism and, yes, even Christianity. For example, Dostoyevsky, whose Christianity is only eclipsed by his Pessimism, is quoted by Sartre: “‘Si deux n’existait pas, tout serait permis.’ C’est là le point de départ de l’existentialisme. En effet, tout *est* permis...” (1970: 36, my emphasis). But if everything is permitted, what must be done? In an ambiguous irony he failed to articulate, Sartre emphasized the (objective) necessity for a Socialist solution – a total revolution – and a clear commitment (“free” and “subjective” as much as “necessary”) to its cause. He thus tried to reconcile the seemingly incompatible “facts” of 1) absolute human freedom and 2) class struggle; this process of dialogue and interchange is crucial to understanding Sartre’s life’s work, its failures and successes. Ultimately, in lived life, Sartre’s “existence” entailed a modern, nihilist “essence”: “an essence-*less* essence”. This new human essence was free, empty and absolute.

We have seen that existentialism relates to, and is in dialogue with, other “Humanisms” of our time, both Spiritual and Materialistic. Sartre craftily synergized Marxism, Existentialism, Modernism & Christianity; a historical alliance of Humanist traditions in a new philosophy of man’s ethical self-empowerment through “authentic” actions & “free” choices. In the end, in his failure to clearly delineate and explicate Humanism as an ideology, a historical tradition and “an attitude”, Sartre’s analysis of Humanism forces him to conclude, in an honest admission of faithfulness and subscription to a doctrine, that “tout le monde est humaniste” (1970: 118); this includes the Liberals, the Christians, the Marxists, the Capitalists, the Artists, the Scientists, the Politicians... *and* the Existentialists - whom Sartre has already, by now, branded as followers of “l’humanisme existentialiste” (1970: 93), a universal doctrine of liberty. “Tout le monde”: the humanistic worldliness of homo *humanus* as homo *universalis*. (Hu)man(ism)=world(wide).

Humanism is the theory that man is an end in itself, for itself and through itself.

With this in mind, how are we to situate Sartre's, or Jaspers', or Kierkegaard's existentialist humanism into the history of humanism as such? I would propose that we need to understand Sartre's "break" with classical humanism as just another phase or facet of the slow unfolding of the historical understanding of man as *homo humanus*, exemplified by the classical authors of philosophy and tragedy, the Renaissance visionaries, artists and inventors, the Enlightenment poets and politicizers, the Modern philosophers of exactitude and progress and the countless other self-made men whose ideals and value reflected man's "essence-less essence" as "free becoming" towards a cosmopolitan, humanitarian and humane social order of humanity.

2. Humanism, Existentialism, Semiotics

We have seen that Sartre's ("humanist-existentialist") transcendental subject, free and absolute, exists in a world of human action, supported by man's neo-humanist "essenceless essence" as the semiotic Umwelt's ethical and social "beginning" (ground) as well as its "end" (meaning). There are no values but those we assign to things as signs. This very same process of semiosis, enacted by the ethical-epistemological transcendental subject, is ascribed by Heidegger (1991) already to Leibniz, in whose rationalism it is the (rational) "humans who determine objects as objects by way of a representation that judges" (118-9). This he relates to "the principle of reason ... *nihil [est] sine ratione*" (118), i.e. Leibniz's "*principium reddendae rationis sufficiens*" (ibid.). Although pre-semiotic, we are able to render this in terms of sign theory. A form of the idea that "*omnes ens habet rationem*" (117) and that "*nihil fit sine causa*" (ibid.) grounds semiotics as "science". Signs, as representations and judgements, belong to the subject-object metaphysics of calculative reason, even in attempting to overcome or supercede this very tradition. Semiotics, see, *is also a humanism*.

We may now expand our Sartrean-Humanist presupposition, or doctrine, Man=World, into a wider ontological framework: Man=World=Language=Being. Heidegger's anti-Sartrean

treatise, “Über den Humanismus” (written 1949), denies the French claim that existentialism is (or *should be*) a humanism, an ideology which, for him, appears as a Roman interpretation, or loan, of Greek παιδεία (see also Sarsila 1998: 204); “In Rom begegnen wir dem ersten Humanismus” (1975: 11). Extolling “eruditio et institutio in bonas artes,” the virtues of the Republic, “homo humanus setzt sich dem homo barbarus entgegen” (10). The Renaissance was a “renascentia romanitatis”, and consequently of “humanitas” and “παιδεία” (11). Opposing the Dark Ages and Scholasticism, Renaissance itself was subject to the opposition between *homo humanus* and *homo barbarus*.

To understand Heidegger, understand Language: “Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins. In ihrer behausung wohnt der Mensch” (1975: 5). For Heidegger, Being is the ontological question; Truth is found in/as the horizon of Being’s self-revealing; Language is the “House of Being” and as such a medium, a (“the”) locus, for Being’s self-revealing; Man “exists”, authentically and transcendently, in this horizon of Being’s self-revelation as Truth. This process is linguistically mediated, or rather propagated or *illuminated* (in the *Schein* of *Erscheinung*). This *im*-mediate connection between Man and World, Truth and Being, is perhaps conducive to an anti-semiotic reading (“our” field being so heavily dependent on mediation), but we should remember the connection between language and semiosis: In understanding, not language in a limited sense (e.g. German, or poetic diction), but language as a system of man’s semiotic structuring in the horizon of Being’s truthful self-revelatory opening, we come closer to (re-)framing the process of Semiosis *as that which mediates and as such establishes an abiding presence*, an abode, for (a framework of) Being. The semiotic relationship, between subject and object, between a thing and the awareness of it, is established *in* language, *via* language, *as* language (here defined as any representational system of signs). Man’s existential role is in the ethical-aesthetical locus of assigning, acting out and re-assessing such representationalist connections and frameworks. For a semiotician, act is always based on semiotic interpretation; consequently, as in Sartrean “literary” existentialism, a “semiotic” existentialism presupposes an acting subject, always-already *transcendentally abiding in semiosis*.

This, I venture to say, is implicitly presupposed by most semioticians whenever they utilize the traditional frameworks of representation, relation (dyadic/triadic), the subject-object dichotomy, human interpretation and so on. Furthermore, in emphasising the role of the observer (who is seen as “critical”, “active”, “free”...), the semiotic orthodoxy is in line with humanist orthodoxy.

Even the greatest “heresies” of humanism – masquerading as anti-humanisms – such as Positivism, Fascism and Post-Structuralism, retained some versions of the myth-structure of *homo humanus* (positivism its “irrefutable fact” and “irreducible event”; fascism its “heroic individual”; post-structuralist theory its “liberation of desire” etc.). As for the dominant and “accepted” forces of Western civilization, the uniformity is all the more breath-taking; the Humanist Brotherhood – an organization into which we are born – shares, protects and nurtures notions of progress, human rights, freedom, technological development (on the “Right”), community life (on the “Left”), human potential, personal achievement, universal education, spiritual fulfilment and so on. Life, today, becomes the fulfilment of the dream and promise of the ennobling of Man, in/as/via Man’s humanistic world-building. I do not intend to say that our whole Civilization is a “sham”; no, we are born into it, we enrich it, and we are enriched by it; but, in the same token, the Western project, one of whose main branches is the Humanist tradition, has to be seen as a *particular* semiotic system and edifice, one with its own unquestioned assumptions and metaphysical drives, structures and programmes. Our Faith in it, perhaps, is “Fate”; yet, faith-in-Reason (or Progress etc.) or the so-called “reasonable faith” of Common Sense is no substitute for *the absolute freedom* of the “essence-less essence” that Man as the opening of Truth *is*. In our effort to become a project of Reason/Progress/Humanity/Civilization, we trade off perhaps something (essential) of the (existential) human nature, to the detriment of our *own* equilibrium and of Life on planet Earth.

Existence precedes Essence; Presence precedes History (i.e. Present the Past); Semiosis precedes Structure. The unquestionable need to appropriate the concept of “freedom”, however problematic it may be, lies in the fact that *we have none*. The Humanism of the Tradition

holds but the *promise* of Freedom. Freedom *from* what? Freedom *of* what? Freedom of existence, truth, beauty, life, action, belief, thought, expression, representation, work, play, experience... But also freedom *from* other kinds of experiences, truths, forms of beauty etc... This double-edged promise is “structurally managed” and “essentially manifest” (i.e. existentially absent); we need to be able to *free ourselves even of this (promised-conditioned-absent) “freedom”*. The criticism of Humanist Metaphysics does not work “against” Humanism but above and beyond it. Humanist freedom is simply too limited – but also it’s just one possibility among many. The very best of humanism is also the very worst of humanism; the very best of *humanity* is also the very worst of humanity. Riches bring sorrow, knowledge ignorance and progress stagnation... Even without accepting Heidegger’s fatalistic notion of “Seinsgeschichte”, History of Being, we can now venture to look at some persistent Humanist fantasies and question their justification and future.

3. The Crisis of Science – The Crisis of Humanism

A major confusion threatens to persist with the distinction made between the so-called Sciences and Humanities. This might lead one to suspect (“hard”) Science of being anti-humanist. And, indeed, the main trends in Science today are certainly materialistic (strictly speaking *a-humanist* or *non-humanist*) when not “trans”-humanist. But science, as an enterprise of power and knowledge, asks the question of “Man” as an end-in-itself (the subjective position of the observer) and interrogates nature (Bacon: “rapes” Her) in search of her secrets (the objective position of the observed).

Science investigates man, *for* man, in the service of humanity, progress and civilization. Knowing this, and the crisis of modern science and the “modern way of life”, one might want to look for the humanities, with their reflective and *ennobling* progressivist discourse, for an answer. But the so-called “humanities” are, too, what Feyerabend called “special interest groups” (1987: 91) in the struggle for funding and legitimacy, tied up in their role as enterprises for the humanistic science of

modernity. Furthermore, what monstrous, naïvely construed wall separates “semiosis of the mind” (Humanities) from “semiosis of matter and *tekhne*” (Science)? Whatever the reason for that edifice of mutual rejection, the gaping *hole* in that wall – the uniting belief-system between the Letters and the Crafts – is the belief in Progress-as-such, Freedom-as-such and Humanity-as-such.

Beliefs and trends may come and go, but the undying eternal flame of these humanist principles illuminates our nocturnal voyages into the unknown - and isn't it Leonardo da Vinci himself holding our hands in the dark, with Pico della Mirandola sharing hands with Kant and Voltaire in a resonant chant of “freedom for all and let no man be a slave to no-one but himself”...

Yet, when all is said, I cannot but agree wholeheartedly with the sentiment expressed in Feyerabend's exasperation, which I will thus appropriate as a sentiment, statement of my own: “[The] difficulties and debates I have just mentioned shrink into insignificance when compared with the *steady expansion of Western civilization* into all areas of the world.” (1987: 120, my emphasis) His criticism is against “Reason and ... Objectivity” (5); he still supports a kind of relativistic humanism. The effects of mono-culture, largely driven by a banalized form of humanist libertinism in defence of the “progress” and “liberation” of Man, are visible in the world around us as well as in the world hidden from us. Genocidal wars, atom bombs, bureaucracy, stress, cancer, pollution, global warming; the problems of/in/by Western civilization are clear. 20th century environmental catastrophes of global magnitude manifest spiritual decay of unprecedented proportions. What has become of Man's self-empowerment? A massive, endless orgy of conspicuous consumption? Yet focusing on the negative isn't *accurate* enough; we still have – *because this is what we want* – authentic beauty, truth, love, power and achievement – but to what end? If the end is man, then the end of man may be near. What has become of alternative worldviews and realities? What has become of the shamanistic, mystical and spiritual traditions of ancient cultures? What has become of deep self-knowing? What of man's ability to intuit and sense world's endless array of wonders? What of our ability, in Blake's immortal rhymes, “to see a world in a grain of sand / and a heaven in

a wild flower / hold infinity in the palm of your hand / and eternity in an hour”? Not only what *has* become, but what *will* become: what is the future of humanity, above and beyond humanism?

In seeing the modern condition, with its many related “issues” – not as something to be “saved by” Humanism but as something largely *created* by it, we may liberate ourselves from the mono-cultural illusions of the status quo and overcome the distinctions between the Arts and the Sciences. Wasn’t this, already, the point of Renaissance Humanism – to liberate man from the particular into the lure and majesty of the universal? Humanism, despite its problems, remains an important tool and ally of the emerging new framework of consciousness. In combatting death, misery, war, oppression, boredom and the tyranny of banal randomness, humanism *has* a role, but its status, at best, is that of an ally, not a conductor or a dictator. Humans *are* significant and fundamental: But, what exactly – in saying this – do we expect (and treat as if it) *isn’t*? Juhani Sarsila, too, has aptly characterized the humanist orthodoxy: “Humanists are pluralists. Nothing gets under their skin (and they cause everybody problems). They were instrumental in setting up the framework of empirical science, which has led humankind on the edge of a precipice. We need to be vocal about this; humanists themselves are silent about their inconvenient history.” (1998: 204, my own translation). The movement away from humanism, for me, means a movement towards existential semiosis and the life sciences. For others it might mean other directions and avenues. The important thing is to *allow* ourselves this leap and this freedom. Our existential condition is one of regaining our ground as thinking, feeling, acting, free beings in a universe rich in interlocking semiotic systems. Humanism is, of course, a synthesis, but one that cannot see(k) beyond itself.

Among scholars who have come to question the viability of the current trends of Western metaphysics we have, too, analytical philosophers like Georg Henrik von Wright, Wittgenstein’s successor at the University of Cambridge, who turned in his later years (1977 et al.) to a reappraisal of the technological-scientific enterprise of “Progress”. He embraced “Humanism” as the solution. This, in my mind, is not enough; the fundamental problem is *not* “Science”, nor

even “Humanism”, but the underlying epistemology of subject-object metaphysics. Toulmin, too, fails to go beyond humanism in his otherwise brutally accurate depiction of Cartesian modernity (1990). Neither nostalgia, nor more deconstruction, is needed, but new metaphysics! David Bohm, the quantum physicist, has written (1980) on the ways in which “Western” science can enter into dialogue with “Eastern” modes of thought, against “fragmentation”. On the issue of the possibility of intercultural context, consult Fritjof Capra’s “Tao of Physics” and the works of Alan Watts, Gregory Bateson, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Robert Anton Wilson, Terence McKenna and Carl Jung.

As Heidegger put it: “Does the ... determination that humans are the *animal rationale* exhaust the essence of humanity? Does the last word that can be said about being run thus: being means ground/reason? ... That is the question. It is the world-question of thinking. Answering this question decides what will become of the earth and of *human existence* on this earth” (1991: 129, my emphasis). This interconnection between “earth” and “human existence” is, as always, at the crux of the matter, and both the problem and the salvation of our metaphysical conundrum. We must learn to experience our own *conditio humana* and Heidegger’s “Angst”, Marx’s “alienation”, Sartre’s “nausea”, Bohm’s “fragmentation”, Kafka’s “bureaucracy” and Feyerabend’s “hegemony of Reason” as side-effects of the experiences created by our existential condition as rational, free, thinking animals. Our Dasein exists for humanity. The “existentialism” of “semiotics” must learn to deal with its Humanist legacy as *a beautiful burden*. Only then will the radical freedom promised (*pro-missus*: “sent forward”) to us become actual, true and real; only then will Renaissance spirit envelop anew our conscious being by its purifying-illuminating *Aufklärung*, god in human form.

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