

Philosophy Between Naturalism and Humanism

By Frederick Olafson

I

MANY PHILOSOPHERS ARE CONVINCED THAT THEIR SUBJECT IS NOW FINALLY on what Kant called “the sure path of a science” and that it has left behind its old idea of itself as the *magistra vitae*—the guide to human life. In one form or another, that idea was shared by almost all of the great figures in the history of philosophy. Nowadays, philosophers claim to have abandoned the freewheeling moralism of these earlier thinkers and to have accepted the discipline required of a responsible department of thought. Its clients are no longer individual human beings who want to know how they are to live; they are the various scientific disciplines that preside over our intellectual world. Philosophy is accordingly cast in the role of Locke’s ‘under-laborer’; its job is to clear away any logical underbrush that could obstruct the progress of the exact sciences. If any regret is felt at having to give up grander conceptions of philosophy as, for example, the conversation of mankind, we are reminded that the only alternative to an active collaboration with the sciences is the old kind of bootless metaphysical speculation that brought philosophy into discredit.

The thesis of this paper is that this issue about what philosophy can or should be has not been settled as decisively as is widely supposed. The primary motive behind the claim that it has been so settled seems to me to be a concern for the epistemic respectability of philosophy itself. In an age of science, after all, philosophy typically cuts the figure of a rather beleaguered holdover from an earlier period in the history of thought. In such a time, a discipline that has real status is commonly thought to be one that makes generous use of a technical vocabulary that holds non-specialists at bay while commanding their respect. It will not do any harm either if it is connected to some useful product or service. As regards the latter, philosophy remains sadly deficient; real efforts have been made; however, to make it seem formidable with respect to the former by filling professional journals with numbered sentences, rigid designators, and other indices of intellectual status. Even so, it is hard not to wonder whether the case that is made for this alliance of philosophy with the scientific worldview is not just as boldly speculative and as hard to reconcile with much of what we know about ourselves as the much-deplored systems of yesteryear are supposed to have been.

Doubts of this kind do not appear to affect the self-confidence of the spon-

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sors of this view of philosophy. They are greatly outweighed in their judgment by the intimate association of philosophy with the natural sciences that is effected when human nature—the terrain on which philosophy has traditionally been most at home—is treated as a physical system like any other. This view of human nature may be said to be the central thesis of the movement of thought that goes by the name of ‘naturalism’. It is pretty much identical with the scientific worldview, and it holds that only the natural sciences can tell us, in their own language, what is in this world that we inhabit. This claim borrows its authority from the achievements of

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those sciences, and it exerts an immense influence over our intellectual world. This influence is by no means confined to the disciplines like physics and molecular biology that are already visibly in compliance with the requirements it sets. Elsewhere as well, in domains

that are remote from the conceptual mode of these exemplary sciences, there is a sense that they set the standard that other disciplines—even the ones traditionally grouped together as “the humanities”—should at least try to meet. In effect, what is being presupposed here is that the whole common-sense framework of understanding that has been so fundamental to human self-understanding ought to be replaced by a physicalistic ‘theory of everything’ in which human beings are treated simply as objects of a special kind and also, like all other objects, as physical systems.

The counter-thesis I want to propose is that naturalism as so understood is an extremely narrow and confining conception of our human nature and also of the functions of philosophy within our culture. Its effect is to deepen the crisis in which our self-understanding as human beings is currently caught. It does so because, in its present configuration, philosophy appears in wider discussions chiefly as an *amicus curiae* speaking on behalf of the unique authority of the sciences. This leaves almost no one to speak for the aspects of our nature that get short shrift when naturalism is in charge. It is also a very high price to pay for the epistemic respectability that philosophy has tried to borrow by throwing in its lot with the natural sciences—a respectability that is, I suspect, largely specious and in any case not appropriate to philosophy.

There is also a special irony in this new allegiance of philosophy to science because philosophers have been telling us for quite a while that positivism, the philosophy that has always exalted the claims of science, is dead. What they presumably mean is that certain positivistic theses about meaning and verification have not stood the test of time very well. In other respects that are surely the central ones, however, the attitude of many philosophers toward the natural sciences implicitly endorses the core positivistic claim that the story these sciences tell us about ourselves is the only one that deserves to be taken seriously. This is presumably what

the late A.J. Ayer had in mind when he declared some years ago that science was what he *believed* in. One may be touched by his piety and yet wonder how different that confession of faith was from the pronouncements of Flaubert's M. Homais, the village pharmacist who was so tediously eloquent on the same subject.

In the title of this paper, humanism is counter-posed to naturalism, and it serves as my term for the alternative to naturalism that is to be sketched in this paper. In some measure this is an idiosyncratic choice of terminology, but it is appropriate because it signifies an intention of giving a much more prominent place to human nature within philosophy and a more accurate account of it than is possible under naturalistic auspices. 'Humanism' will almost certainly not go down well among philosophers and others to whom it principally connotes a fatuous and complacent insistence on what remarkable beings we are in the face of the most damning evidence to the contrary. Humanism has been almost everyone's scapegoat for quite a while now, and there have even been charges of Marxist provenience that it forms a part of the ideological cover for privilege and the exploitation on which privilege rests. At the end of a century of genocide, it is probably inevitable that our view of human nature should have taken on the dark coloration that makes anything like an ideal conception of humanity seem to be both ridiculous and offensive. Certainly, the great speeches about "man" in Sophocles and Shakespeare no longer resonate positively with our sense of ourselves. We have even been urged by a leading philosopher not to use the word "humanity" or its derivatives any longer. One cannot help wondering, though, what substitute for it could have been found for the "elephant man" as portrayed by John Hurt in the film of some years ago, when he was backed against a wall by a vicious mob and cried out, "I am a human being."

I recognize that what I am calling 'humanism' is rather different from what usually passes by that name. Although it is best known for its celebration of "the dignity and excellence of human beings," in practice it has been mainly a response to the fact that the achievements in which it takes such pride have been in danger of being lost, destroyed, or simply forgotten. Accordingly, the work of most humanists, from the scholiasts of Alexandria to the present day, has been mainly an effort to preserve and, where necessary, to recover and reconstruct the writings of poets, philosophers, and historians that might otherwise have been lost. This work has been done out of a conviction that these "classics" can nourish succeeding generations and stimulate them to emulate the great achievements of the past. Humanism so understood is not really anything that one could properly call a philosophy in the sense of a carefully worked-out system of thought. It is, instead, a cultural and educational ideal, which found expression in the *humanitas* of which Cicero spoke and that has fostered a spirit of cordiality toward all human beings and an interest in their lives.

Nonetheless, humanism has taken on a more philosophical character in the modern period. A philosophical humanism is one that is based on a philosophical conception of human nature and provides distinctively philosophical reasons for taking the kind of interest in human beings and in their—our—accomplishments that has just been described. There were suggestions of what such a philosophy might be like in the writings of some of the Italian humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—Manetti, for example, and Pico della Mirandola. It was not until the eighteenth century, however, that a body of philosophical thought began to emerge that may be said to have provided that kind of rationale for the priorities of humanism. Giambattista Vico—the first and perhaps the greatest philosopher of

humanism—was the first to question the applicability of the Cartesian mentality, which had been associated with the great scientific achievements of the preceding century, to the wider business of life and, more specifically, to the understanding and interpretation of human culture.

What was needed, however, before an authentically humanistic philosophy could be said to come into being, was a new and more deeply conceived understanding of the human subject that would break with Cartesian assumptions about the mind in a more radical way. Cartesian assumptions were problematic because, as a result of the very sharp contrast they introduced between ‘subject’ and ‘object’, everything ‘subjective’ (and thus almost everything distinctively human) was denied any real cognitive value for purposes other than those of psychology. This meant that the quintessentially human was identified with the inwardness of a private experience. A whole culture of introspective psychology and *examen interieur* grew out of this way of conceiving human nature; in spite of all the great changes that have taken place since, this identification of the human with the subjective is still with us.

Philosophical idealism began the task of undermining mind-body dualism and introducing a new conception of the human subject. Most notably, Kant developed a conception of the mind as a set of conditions for the possibility of experiencing a public world rather than as a set of private states in a problematic relation to any such world. In Hegel’s thought, the same theme was carried forward in ways that made a clean separation of the ‘objective’ from the ‘subjective’ even more problematic. These revisions of the traditional scheme of self-world relations pointed the way to the thesis that human beings are not simply the spectators of a world process that is radically independent of them. They are, instead, the beings that constitute the world as a world. This is not to say that they create or produce it. What it means is that self and world—the latter has to be distinguished from nature—go together in a peculiarly intimate way that cannot be rendered by any idea of the mind as a distinct substance or of the brain as an organ inside our skulls. We are, in other words, beings that cannot be conceived in isolation from the world in which we are, as beings conceived according to the Cartesian notion of the mind as *la chose qui pense* could.

Much of the subsequent development of Western philosophical thought has taken the form of reactions to these developments and to others like them. Some of the most interesting ones have come from the line of ‘existential’ philosophers, among them Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. Both of these thinkers were much concerned with the relation of their own thought to humanism. Sartre, it will be recalled, declared that his existentialism was “a humanism,” although the extraordinarily grim view he had taken in his early writings of our options as human beings might well have been expected to dictate a different position on this point. The attitude of Heidegger was more complex. In his “Letter on Humanism,” he famously indicted humanism for having relied on an ontology that was at bottom the same as that of the sciences of nature, which treats everything that exists as a thing of some kind, either material or mental. This is to say that humanism has conceived human beings simply as entities of a special kind, in abstraction from being as such—that is, from the being of the entities around them in the world and, most particularly, from the distinctive relation in which human beings stand to those entities as well as to themselves. What Heidegger means by ‘being’ has often been misunderstood because people still conceive ‘being’ in Platonic terms and as so remote from ordinary experience that it can be apprehended only in some high-flying tran-

scendence of the world in which we live. It is, instead, archi-familiar but for this very reason, Heidegger holds, "unthought." It has also been marginalized by scientific thought because the relation in which we stand to things in the world cannot be expressed in the terms made available by their conceptual vocabularies. According to Heidegger, we prefer to think of the being—the 'whatness' or quiddity—of the entities with which we deal as though it were somehow conferred on them by us in an act of thought; being thus becomes, in effect, the creature of inference and theory. But being, understood as the fact that entities are present to us as what they *are*, is not something that we somehow spin out of our own heads. It has to be thought of instead as the outcome of a primordial event—what Heidegger calls an *Ereignis*—by which things become available to us as our vis-à-vis in the world and as what is there *for* us and is not simply side by side with us as in nature. It is this fact that defines our condition, and it does so without our having any control over it or deserving any credit for it. Because humanism, as Heidegger thinks, has been oblivious to the constitutive role that being, so understood, plays in all the distinctively human functions on which it lays such emphasis, any account of human being that builds on this bad metaphysical foundation must be seriously defective.

Another feature of Heidegger's argument complicates this case against humanism. Heidegger insisted that "man" (*der Mensch*) had been admitted to a special relationship with being as such and that it is this special distinction, to which we are pervasively oblivious, that sets human being apart from the rest of the natural world. He does not himself suggest that this might provide the basis for a new humanism and probably would not have liked any such suggestion. He had chosen to construe the relationship between being as such and human being in so one-sided a way that all significant agency was attributed to being itself and human being was represented as wholly dependent upon being as so conceived. Nevertheless, for those who still think that there are some things that human beings *can* do, humanism might be transposed into a different key by an acknowledgment of the role of being as such that was missing in traditional humanism. In this way, criticisms of its anthropocentrism and the vanity that goes with it can be turned aside without denying all agency to human being as Heidegger did. In any case, that is the possibility I want to explore in this paper.

II

IT IS LIKELY THAT THE SUGGESTION I HAVE JUST MADE WILL STRIKE MANY AS BIZARRE AND that it will not please either those who respect Heidegger's philosophical achievement or those who do not. One reason why it may seem implausible is the assumption that humanism is committed to a resolutely positive picture of human nature and must, therefore, be irreconcilable with anything that emanates from existential philosophy with its strong emphasis on the radical finitude and contingency of human life. Plainly, though, any humanism that expects to be taken seriously today has to be able to account for the evil as well as the good that human beings can do, especially since neither would be possible in the absence of the special endowments of which humanism has traditionally made so much. Humanism, in other words, must double as moral realism if it is to carry any weight in a post-Auschwitz world.

There is another misunderstanding about humanism that needs to be set aside. As I have already noted, humanism has, since the Renaissance, often been

associated with systems of thought like Plato's that soared far above the everyday world of sense-experience and ordinary beliefs. It is, however, a fundamental mistake to assume that an affinity with speculative metaphysics is implicit in humanism and that, as a result, humanism and the humanities have to affirm realities that are unknown to common experience. To the contrary, as the thought of an Erasmus or a Montaigne amply demonstrates, it is the idiom of everyday life and the framework of understanding we usually call 'common sense' that humanism presupposes. For present purposes, the capital fact about that framework is that it was in place long before anything like theoretical science got under way. To cite just one example, it can hardly be denied that a common-sense understanding of what it is to be an active being—one that at any given moment can do *either* this *or* that—was prior to the emergence of physical science. The typical scientific view of such prior understandings is that they block deeper insights into the matters they address and should therefore be discarded. My thesis will be that they express what might be called the liminal condition by which the situation in which theoretical science becomes possible is constituted.

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The fundamental issue for the kind of humanism I have in mind has to do with the way the human subject is to be conceived. I spoke earlier of the Cartesian conception of the subject and the tradition of inwardness that it founded. That way of thinking about ourselves has been under attack for quite a while now, but it is still widely regarded as the only serious alternative to the naturalistic reduction of human beings to

the status of physical systems. In fact, a significantly new concept of the human subject has been proposed in our time: the concept of being-in-the-world. That is the concept that I want to characterize briefly and to propose as one that can serve the purposes of humanism better than any other that is currently available to us.

It should be noted first that it is a concept of a human being that I am invoking and not that of a mind. The trouble about mind is that, in the idiom of Heidegger, it has a disconcerting way of turning out to be a "world-less subject." By that is meant that a mind is, and can be, conversant only with its own states, which are supposed to represent things in the 'external' world; it is, consequently, not itself really *in* the world that these states allegedly represent. A human being, by contrast, is emphatically in that world—in it in a peculiarly intimate way with which we are all utterly familiar but typically lack words to express. One way of expressing the special character of our way of being in the world is to say that we *have* a world. That world is not the creature of inference or of theory; it is, instead, quite literally what we are *in*, although not in the way a quart of milk is in a refrigerator. There can, moreover, be no question of separating human beings from their bodies as mind-body dualism did, but at the same time no question either of reducing those bodies to physical systems. The idea here is that, while chemistry and molecular biology certainly make a major contribution to an understanding of bodily process-

es, a human being as a whole has active and, above all, disclosive functions that cannot be rendered in the conceptual mode of these disciplines. A human being is not a compound of body and mind (or soul); it needs to be referred to instead in some way that expresses the unitary fact of its being-in-the-world.

As the term 'world' is commonly used, it means simply the totality of actual entities—in short, everything there is. We humans are, of course, among those entities and have certain distinctive attributes of our own of which traditional humanism has been very proud. There is, however, another use of 'world' that expresses something akin to what I have in mind. We speak of a doctor's world or a child's world; in this use the word means something like the special character of the kind of world that a child or a doctor inhabits. That kind of world is an environment—an *Umwelt*—and what I am suggesting here is that human beings constitutionally, and not just as doctors or as children or in any other special capacity, are in the world as such an *Umwelt*. What this means is that they—we—are in it not just as countable entities among all the others that make up the totality that is the world in that other sense, but as entities for which other entities can be there or, as one can also say, present. This is not a proper occasion for entering into a full analysis of what is involved in this concept. I offer it here simply as the best word available for expressing something with which, as I have already said, we are so deeply familiar that we normally feel no need to give it a name.

There are a number of things that could be proposed as constitutive elements of being-in-the-world; they range from the form of temporality that involves distinctions among past, present, and future (not just between "before" and "after") to an ordering of our lives in terms of alternative possibilities and not just causal sequences. Typically, such features are thought of as 'subjective', in the sense that they express something about the person who understands the world in these terms rather than something about that world itself. For purposes of acquiring real scientific knowledge, it is required that these subjective elements be replaced by others that fit the scientific paradigm. But if we try to apply this distinction to the people engaged in an inquiry and, more specifically, to their observations or perceptions, a difficulty becomes evident. Here again we have the contrast between the way something is ordinarily understood and the way that science deals with it. In this case, perception, as it is ordinarily understood, puts us in the presence of things around us in the world. In its scientific version, however, it is itself a self-contained neural and behavioral process in that world, a process, moreover, that is no longer supposed to produce sensations in a mind ontologically distinct from the body in which it takes place. The latter—the neural and behavioral process—is what counts as 'objective' in this context; the former—the presence to the perceiver of something in the enviroing world—is 'subjective' and accordingly has no place in the account of perception. The replacement of the latter by the former may satisfy the requirements of the scientific paradigm, but it does so by producing a world in which there can be no scientists because there can be no perceivers.

One of the advantages that accrues when the concept of being-in-the-world is used is that it offers an alternative to just this contrast between the objective and the subjective that has played such an important role in the scientific treatment of human nature. Lots of things, it seems, that we were quite confident about—colors, possibilities, feelings—have turned out not to satisfy scientific criteria of objectivity and must therefore be regarded as purely subjective. Accordingly, the humanities have had to be thought of as dealing in this sort of subjective bric-a-

brac; and this has meant that they can tell us essentially nothing about what is in our world or even about ourselves as real entities in that world. What is denominated 'subjective' exists only 'in the mind', and 'subjective' has been interpreted to mean what has only been *thought* to be real. The usual story we are told about this is that, with the dawning of scientific enlightenment, subjective entities have had to retreat like the ghost of Hamlet's father into the non-being that is their proper element. If like other ghosts they still "squeak and gibber" and still tempt the imaginations of the philosophically unwary, we are told that we can resist their efforts to re-enter the sphere of the actual by ritually pronouncing the word "subjective" over them as often as we can. That will ensure that we will not have to make a place for them in our "theories of everything"—of everything 'objective', that is. It is, nevertheless, pretty clear that this way of making it appear that the world really only contains the kinds of entities with which the natural sciences are comfortable is glaringly circular. What is supposed to be merely 'subjective' is got out of the way of what is 'objective'; the natural sciences as the realization of objective thought can then claim to be "the theory of everything." Surely, one cannot help thinking, there must be some other way of dealing with these matters that does not rig the outcome as flagrantly as this kind of reasoning does.

The very different suggestion I want to make about this is that much of what we have been taught to think of as 'subjective' and, consequently, un-incorporable into the objective system of the world is in fact a necessary condition for our having a world at all. But if that is the case, at least some elements of what is being rejected on grounds of its subjectivity must also be acknowledged to be necessary conditions for our having an 'objective' world as well. What is objective in the special scientific sense of this term would not be what turns out to be real when we set aside all our delusive imaginings and think about the world only in rigorously scientific terms. It would be, instead, what we arrive at as the residue that remains after a number of conceptual operations are performed in which certain properties and relations are edited out of the world as science conceives it. The point here is that these properties and relations would remain perfectly respectable features of the world considered independently of the special conceptual requirements of physical science. If this sounds like a demotion in status for what is denominated 'objective', it has to be borne in mind that no scientific result is called into question by it. It is simply a matter of the corpus of scientific fact having been set in the context that it in any case presupposes—the context of things in the world becoming available to us as the beings who are able to deal with them as what they *are*. That context itself—our "life-world," as it has been called—is plainly not derivable from the natural order as it is conceived by science. The one diminution of the claims made by the natural sciences that is required is that they surrender their claim to be the theory of everything. If they insist on making a derivation of the life-world from their objective world a part of their program and thus returning to the old unworkable objective/subjective contrast, then it will be the job of philosophy to show why this is a bad idea. It will be hard for philosophy to do that if its self-image remains that of a respectful "under-laborer" in the service of the natural sciences.

The thesis about humanism for which I am arguing can now be stated in a more definite way. Humanism is the acknowledgement of the distinctive ontological status of human beings as dwellers in the world, from which the nature of the natural sciences can be reached by abstracting from features of the objects of an inquiry that are irrelevant to its purposes. To this it must be added that we our-

selves—our lives—are, by virtue of this status, set in relationships to one another that generate distinctively human fact—social, historical and moral. This kind of fact is what is meant by terms like “the life-world” and “the manifest image.” Far from being mere appearance, this life-world is a necessary condition of the elaboration of the idea of an objective world-system. What this means is that there is no need to go on apologizing for the deficiencies of humanistic modes of understanding ourselves. These can properly be described as a-scientific—certainly not un-scientific or anti-scientific—because they are prior to and independent of the discoveries science may make in exploring our brains or our bodies. That understanding, which is in fact presupposed by all such inquiries, can also be elaborated in fully particularized, concrete forms in literature and history, and it is not susceptible of being replaced by, or derived from, a wholly different kind of understanding. Together, the accumulated products of this kind of thought—

from Homer to Jane Austen and beyond—constitute the substance of both humanism and the humanities.

It is a great puzzle to me that naturalism should feel it has either to pass over these facts in silence or to acknowledge them only with the greatest reluctance and with every sign of doing so against its own better judgment. No scientific result would be called into question by such an acknowledgement; only the imperialistic claims of the scientific world-view with which some philosophers have chosen to identify themselves stand to suffer. In my view, the withdrawal of those claims would not be an occasion for public mourning; far from being a setback for philosophy; it would be a liberation. There is after all a special obligation on the part of philosophy not to over-identify itself with any one element of our situation as human beings. That obligation forms part of its larger responsibility to try to show by its example how all the very diverse elements in that situation hang together and to do so without antecedently reconstructing them in some way that brings them into harmony with some favored paradigm like the one proffered by the scientific world view. Perhaps we are not yet in a position to achieve anything as ambitious as that, but in that case it would be best to acknowledge that fact and not try to plow under whatever resists some assimilation that we have in mind. The one indisputable allegiance for philosophy is to the whole—the whole of knowledge and the whole of human life and culture. If it can make even a small contribution to the resolution of the great issues with which the world now has to deal, it will be by remaining true to that allegiance. That means resisting the temptation to take currently fashionable short-cuts and speaking for an integral humanity, which we all may be said in some sense to understand but that we have yet to conceive adequately.

All of this casts a new and very different light on the whole topic of humanism. Humanism plainly needs a better philosophical rationale than can be derived from the sources of intellectual authority to which it has traditionally looked. Such a rationale would provide instruments of intellectual self-defense for

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the kind of interest humanism has taken in human beings throughout its career. That interest has been most concretely realized in literature and history and it centers on the moral dimension of human life as it is represented in the one and the other. Unfortunately, the understanding we achieve of our situation by these means has lacked a conception of itself that can maintain its own integrity against the scientific and philosophical effort that has been made to displace it or to absorb it into the kind of world process that naturalism postulates. Plainly, that is a task for which philosophy is uniquely suited and so the question is whether philosophers are prepared to acknowledge the humanistic affiliations of their subject.

Much of the time philosophers tend to act as though they were conceptual trouble-shooters who are called in to get some discipline or other out of a logical jam it has got itself into. That would make the clientele of philosophy these great corporate entities themselves that preside over our intellectual world. In fact, I am far from sure that there is any great demand for the services of philosophers in these quarters; they tend to think they already have answers to all the big questions that interest them. The true clientele of philosophy is elsewhere. It is made up of people who in one way or another ask themselves Sellars's question: how do things in the broadest possible sense of that word hang together in the broadest possible sense of that word? Those who ask this question do not ask it in some special capacity—as physicists or psychologists or whatever or for the special purposes of any such discipline. They ask it simply as human beings who are curious about the wider context of their lives. That is a motive that is, in the best sense of the word, humanistic and I think it expresses an interest to which philosophy should respond. Philosophy has, of course, its more technical aspects and these have to be acknowledged as requiring the same careful and rigorous treatment as any other epistemic matter. I would argue, however, that within philosophy these matters stand in a hermeneutic circle with the great question that Kant posed: What is man? Naturalism thinks it already has an answer to that question—the one developed by the natural sciences. I think it is still an open question and that as such it defines the character of philosophy as the highest intellectual expression of humanism. ◻