

Notes on “Philosophical Anthropology” in Germany. An Introduction

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Abstract: The article opens (§ 1) with the paradoxical situation of philosophical anthropology between a heralded destiny of decadence (W. Schulz) and the surge of its argumentations and notions in the present-day debate on ethical themes and on the very idea of “human nature,” as well as in the redefinition of social philosophy (J. Habermas and P. Sloterdijk). It seeks, then (§§ 2-5), to trace a sort of “metaphilosophy” of philosophical anthropology, discussing the principal interpretations (H. Schnädelbach, H. Paetzold, O. Marquard, W. Lepenies, etc.) that characterize it as reactive, open to a broader range of disciplines (the natural, human, social and cultural sciences) and installed in the clash between nature and history, intertwining empirical and theoretical elements and capable of providing a descriptive base for moral choices. It then takes up (§§ 6-8) the more recent perspectives of a philosophical anthropology for the twenty-first century that oscillate between its reconstruction around a strong theoretical core – excentric positionality – as a current of unitary thought and the divergent interpretation that focuses on the biopolitical approach, in order to redefine the specifically human along the vertical axis of anthropogenesis and evolutionary comparison and the horizontal axis of the analysis of diverse cultures in search of the premises of human vital practice. It concludes (§ 9) by suggesting an exploration – through the articles that follow – of the role of stimulus that philosophical anthropology and its authors play in the most disparate currents on the scene of contemporary German philosophy, such as critical theory, historical anthropology, neopragmatism, social philosophy, and the philosophy of culture.

1. A Supersession Foretold and an Unforeseen Return

When, in the early 1970s, Walter Schulz, in the “corporeity” section of his overview of “philosophy in a changed world,” diagnosed the “supersession (*Aufhebung*) of philosophical anthropology” – its obsolescence, its leaving the scientific anthropology debate and reaching, in philosophical terms, a dead end – he stressed, in particular, two aspects of the process: first, the insurmountable difficulties of a biologically-oriented anthropology; and second, its inability to deal with the ethical problems of contemporary society.¹ For

¹ W. Schulz, “Die Aufhebung der philosophischen Anthropologie,” in Id., *Philosophie in der veränderten Welt*, Pfullingen: Neske, 1972, pp. 457-467.

Schulz modern philosophical anthropology represents a “transitional phase” and is destined to be resolved in the particular disciplines that it incautiously evoked to arrive at an essential determination of human being (*Mensch*), dissolving, on the one hand, in the empirics of its engagement with the animal and, on the other, being obliged to admit its insufficiency and to pass on to an “essential knowing” and to a “knowing directed to salvation.” Nevertheless, interest in the concrete dimension of the problems means that “the possibilities, of themselves already present in anthropology, of turning from the universal and substantial to the concrete and specific, increase decisively.”² Schulz, here, is referring to a movement towards themes and methods of decisive disciplines, such as psychology, psychoanalysis and, in particular, sociology, confirmed also by the fact that “the major anthropologists now address sociological problems”; that is, by the tendency towards the sociologization of the knowledge of human being (*Wissen vom Menschen*) in philosophical anthropology, noted after the second world war especially in the works of Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen.³ The consequence has been the inevitable dissipation and loss of a viewpoint mediated between the internal and the external that leads, however, to an incapacity of anthropology itself to tackle the ethical problem of a “mediation between science and life,” which for Schulz is possible only in a cross between the propensity of philosophers for particular sciences and the propensity of scholars of particular sciences to “philosophize” from an ethical standpoint.⁴

Given this heralded “supersession,” it may be surprising to see how a contemporary philosopher as important as Jürgen Habermas recently and repeatedly has recourse to the conceptual instruments of philosophical anthropology, asserting its topicality. Commenting on the return – today, in this epoch of “postmetaphysical” thought – of the ethical problem par excellence “on the plane of anthropological universality,” in the shape of the “original philosophical question concerning the ‘good life,’” and in the context of an “organic nature” that thanks to the developments of the biological sciences no longer presents itself as “given” but now falls within the sphere of a “new type” of intentional “intervention,” becoming available and manipulable, Habermas affirms that “to the degree that even the human organism is drawn into this sphere of intervention, Helmuth Plessner’s phenomenological dis-

² Ibid., p. 462.

³ See K.-S. Rehberg, “Philosophische Anthropologie und die ‘Soziologisierung’ des Wissens vom Menschen. Einige Zusammenhänge zwischen einer philosophischen Denktradition und der Soziologie in Deutschland,” *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 33 (1981), pp. 160–198, as well as Rehberg’s paper below.

⁴ Schulz, “Die Aufhebung,” p. 465 (and see the entire section “Die ethische Ausrichtung der Anthropologie,” pp. 463–467).

inction between ‘being a body’ (*Leibsein*) and ‘having a body’ (*Körperhaben*) becomes surprisingly current.”⁵ Habermas appears, moreover, to return fruitfully to the first stage of his philosophical career, when he was a student of Erich Rothacker’s,⁶ also making use of Gehlen to comprehend the reasons for which “symbolic forms of representation and ritualistic forms of expression occur in modern societies, and not only in residual forms.”⁷

In his turn, Peter Sloterdijk,⁸ the other protagonist and opposing party in the debate in Germany on the use of biotechnologies to modify human DNA, after long having made a show of indifference, if not of ferocious sarcasm, toward philosophical anthropology, has more recently dedicated a section of the third volume of his monumental *Sphären* (2004) to Gehlen’s “fiction of deficient being” (*Mängelwesen-Fiktion*) to show the profound ambiguity of the structure based on an original deficiency and to turn it into its opposite: “*Homo sapiens*, in other words, is not a deficient being, which makes up for its poverty with culture, but is a being endowed with a luxurious constitution (*Luxuswesen*), which by means of its protocultural abilities makes itself sufficiently sure of managing to survive in the face of dangers and, eventually, to prosper.”⁹ More generally, in the construction of an original “terminology of philosophical anthropology” of his own, Sloterdijk has taken a series of concepts directly from, or very important to, Gehlen’s work, such as “unburdening” (*Entlastung*), “openness to the world” (*Weltoffenheit*), “institutions,” “neoteny,” and “non-specialization,” recombining them in a new theoretical context and indicating in the connection formed by the first two “one of the few effectively original conceptual formations (*Begriffsbildungen*) in twentieth-century sciences of culture.”¹⁰ Sloterdijk himself has also included Plessner and Gehlen in the genealogy of an idea of “alienation” (*Entfremdung*)

⁵ J. Habermas, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001, pp. 33, 27–28, and see p. 89 (note 55); [*The Future of Human Nature*, trans. W. Rehg, M. Pensky and H. Beister, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003, pp. 15, 11–12, and see p. 50 (note 43)].

⁶ See J. Fischer, *Philosophische Anthropologie. Eine Denkrichtung des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Freiburg and Munich: Alber, 2008, pp. 276–277, 312–321.

⁷ J. Habermas, “Symbolischer Ausdruck und rituelles Verhalten. Ein Rückblick auf Ernst Cassirer und Arnold Gehlen,” in Id., *Zeit der Übergänge. Kleine Politische Schriften IX*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001; [“Symbolic Expression and Ritual Behavior: Ernst Cassirer and Arnold Gehlen Revisited,” in Habermas, *Time of Transitions*, trans. C. Cronin and M. Pensky, Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity, 2006, p. 69].

⁸ For a critical reconstruction of the debate and a profile of Sloterdijk, see G. Raulet, “Peter Sloterdijk, la *Critique de la raison cynique*, et après,” in Id., *La Philosophie Allemande depuis 1945*, Paris: Colin, 2006, pp. 305–316 and <<http://multitudes.samizdat.net/~L-affaire-Sloterdijk>>.

⁹ P. Sloterdijk, “Die Mängelwesen-Fiktion,” in Id., *Sphären. Plurale Sphärologie*, vol. 3, *Schäume*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004, pp. 699–711, here p. 706.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 707.

– as constitutive of the relation of human beings with themselves and with society and in opposition to the idea of a fall or original loss that must then be recovered from – that proves decisive in the position of Niklas Luhmann and for his social philosophy itself.¹¹

2. *Between Theory and Empirics*

As Herbert Schnädelbach recalled, concluding his *Philosophy in Germany 1831-1933*, it was Habermas himself, however, who back in 1958 proclaimed the distinctive feature of philosophical anthropology to be its “reactive and essentially assimilative character.” Between anthropology as a secondary or fundamental part of a philosophical systematics and the philosophical anthropology of our epoch we find, to mark the gap and the watershed, the birth of “empirical human sciences,” from human biology to cultural anthropology.¹² Arising “as a reaction,” as Habermas remarks in his encyclopedia article,¹³ philosophical anthropology renounces claim to being fundamental, in the sense of furnishing “necessary grounds and premises”; it no longer presents itself as “spontaneous scientific filiation” stemming from the very body of philosophy. On the contrary, it is “a reaction of philosophy to the advent of those sciences that contend with it for its object or even for its very right to attend to it.” Located in an intermediate position between theory and empirics, philosophical anthropology defines its disciplinary task as the “philosophical interpretation of scientific results,” or, the “theoretical interpretation of empirical results.” Hence we can date the moment of its birth to the rise of the human sciences, “from biological anthropology, to psychology and to sociology,” which are themselves the condition for the “need” of it to arise: “such philosophical disciplines that arose ‘as a reaction’ no longer engage in the enterprise of *prima philosophia*: they no longer ground the sciences, but elaborate them; they no

¹¹ P. Sloterdijk, “Luhmann Anwalt des Teufels,” in Id., *Nicht gerettet. Versuche nach Heidegger*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001, pp. 82–141, here p. 107; see also B. Accarino, “Phantasia certissima facultas. Entfremdung und Phantasia in der philosophischen Anthropologie,” in J. Fischer and H. Joas (eds.), *Kunst, Macht und Institution. Studien zur Philosophischen Anthropologie, soziologischen Theorie und Kulturosoziologie*, Frankfurt am Main and New York: Campus, 2003, pp. 17–34.

¹² H. Schnädelbach, “Epilog: Der Mensch,” in Id., *Philosophie in Deutschland 1831-1933*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983, pp. 263–281, here p. 265; [“Epilogue: Man,” in Id., *Philosophy in Germany 1831-1933*, trans. E. Matthews, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 221].

¹³ J. Habermas, “Anthropologie,” in A. Diemer and I. Frenzel (eds.), *Fischer-Lexikon Philosophie*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1958, pp. 18–35.

longer make sciences ‘spring’ from higher metaphysical principles, but have to admit that they are ‘given.’”¹⁴

Heinz Paetzold, then, supplemented Habermas’s thesis, defining philosophical anthropology as the “scientifically informed doctrine of human beings,” while also historically documenting its positive connection with the human sciences. To cite just the prime examples, he recalls exemplary cases in the works of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, Erich Rothacker and Arnold Gehlen. Scheler took up Wolfgang Köhler’s studies on primate behavior to discuss whether practical intelligence, the practical and instrumental capacity to act, is an exclusively human trait; on the basis of Köhler’s work, which demonstrated that primates are indeed capable of technical action, he concluded that, at most, what may be exclusive to humans is spirit as a principle contrasted with life. Plessner, then, from his engagement with biochemistry derived the principle by which the specifically human modality of being can be obtained by retracing the succession of degrees of living beings. A careful examination of the research on prehistory led Rothacker to conclude that it is not language alone that is essential to human beings, but also their relationship with fire and their use and invention of tools. Finally, the foundational thesis of Gehlen’s anthropology – that of the human as “deficient being,” a “creature of lack” (*Mängelwesen*) – with the consequent necessity of a compensation in culture, rests on the studies of biological morphology and, in particular, on the law of retarded development in the prolonged “fetalization” (Bolk, Schwindewolf) of the human organism compared to the other higher mammals.¹⁵

In this way, one inevitably poses the question of the specificity of the philosophical dimension in philosophical anthropology itself. Schnädelbach, recalling the terms of Plessner’s inaugural lesson in Groningen on “the task of philosophical anthropology” (held in 1936), responds by speaking of “a project for an *empirical* science of man with an *interpretive, meaning-establishing* and *identity-securing* purpose.”¹⁶ He goes on to say that if this is the fundamental philosophical aspect that characterizes philosophical anthropology, then we may also consider the question “Who are we?” to be decisive for it, as a direct development of that original philosophy of what man is. We may, moreover, judge its origin to be a skeptical attitude toward the “*traditional self-image of man*,” which is accompanied – in Scheler, in Plessner and in many of their contemporaries – by “skepticism with regard to all attempts to

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁵ See H. Paetzold, “Der Mensch,” in E. Martens and H. Schnädelbach (eds.), *Philosophie. Ein Grundkurs*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1985, pp. 440–479, in particular *Die Philosophische Anthropologie im 20. Jahrhundert*, pp. 462–471.

¹⁶ Schnädelbach, “Epilog: Der Mensch,” p. 269 [224].

resolve the ‘crisis of the Ego’ with the traditional philosophical or reflexive self-certainty.” Both these factors give rise to the “precarious connection of the philosophical with the empirical elements in the concept of a philosophical anthropology.”¹⁷ For that matter, as Schnädelbach remarks elsewhere, if anthropology were *of itself* philosophical it would have no need to *call itself* philosophical. Nevertheless, the human sciences on their own are not able to answer the question of who we are; they limit themselves to providing us with pieces of “information” that will be “connected, interpreting them, to the self-images we have formed on the basis of the everyday and scientific experience we have of ourselves”: “anthropology in a scientific perspective is an interpretative discipline, and in this consists the unchanged topicality of philosophical anthropology as a discipline of philosophy.”¹⁸

3. *Nature and History*

Such an approach does, in fact, run the risk – as Andreas Steffens noted in his reconstruction of twentieth-century philosophy under the banner of the “return of human being”¹⁹ – of locking anthropology into a “philosophy of reason” while referring the latter to a “theory of rationality,” thereby transforming the “form of anthropological thought” into a “handmaid of philosophy, and the latter, in turn, into a handmaid of science.” At the same time, however, it conserves its critical potential in complicating and nuancing one of the key assumptions for the identification of philosophical anthropology, namely, its opposition to the philosophy of history, which renders the disciplines mutually exclusive, as Odo Marquard maintained: “a turn toward the philosophy of history is possible only as an abandonment of anthropology, and a turn toward anthropology only as an abandonment of the philosophy of

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 269 [224].

¹⁸ H. Schnädelbach, “Die Philosophie und die Wissenschaften vom Menschen,” in C. Belluth and U. Müller-Schöll (eds.), *Mensch und Moderne. Beiträge zur philosophischen Anthropologie und Gesellschaftskritik*, Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1989, pp. 19–39, here pp. 25, 37. For the development of his conception of human being as “rational animal,” see Schnädelbach, *Zur Rehabilitierung des “animal rationale”*. *Vorträge und Abhandlungen 2*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992.

¹⁹ A. Steffens, *Philosophie des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts oder Die Wiederkehr des Menschen*, Leipzig: Reclam, 1999, p. 315 (note 107). For a discussion of Steffens’s book, within the framework of a revival of studies on philosophical anthropology that also includes the books by H.-P. Krüger, *Zwischen Lachen und Weinen* (see Krüger’s paper below) and Th. Fuchs, *Leib, Raum, Person. Entwurf einer phänomenologischen Anthropologie*, Stuttgart: Cotta, 2000, see U. Bröckling, “Um Leib und Leben. Neue Studien zur Philosophischen Anthropologie,” *Philosophische Rundschau*, 48 (2001), pp. 136–152.

history.”²⁰ From this standpoint, not every “theory of human being” is to be understood as philosophical anthropology, but only those that become possible through a “turn towards the life-world” and are realized through a “turn towards nature.” Here, “a turn towards the life-world” signifies “philosophy’s abandonment, on the one hand, of ‘traditional scholastic metaphysics’ and, on the other, of the ‘mathematical science of nature,’” i.e., of abstract human beings, in favor of their concrete social, historical, everyday and natural world; while “a turn towards nature” signifies an “abandonment of the philosophy of history,” i.e., of the “philosophy of the ‘human mission’ through the theory of freedom as humanity’s ‘ultimate purpose’ and through the theory of the historical life-world as a progressive ‘mediation’ of this ultimate purpose.”²¹ One of the merits of Marquard’s thesis is the “long shot” of the reconstruction of philosophical anthropology he provides, fitting it into a history that begins in the eighteenth century; another merit is his clarity in sharply defining the objections raised, for example, by thinkers such as Heidegger²² (“having become anthropology, philosophy itself perishes”) or Lukács (“the metamorphosis of philosophy into anthropology has fossilized human being into fixed objectivity, removing both history and dialectic”), and in identifying the various forms of anthropological “secession” in twentieth-century thought (for example, Kojève, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre in Marxism; Löwith, Bollnow, Staiger, Binswanger and others in the philosophy of existence). The rigidity of the criterion of nature as connoted by genuine anthropology proves, nonetheless, to be overly exclusive with respect to the breadth of the “phenomenology of the human” present in contemporary thought, while the idea that “it is only the anti-historicist anthropologies that are anti-historicist” becomes trivial, so that one might speak, at most, not of anthropology versus philosophy of history, but rather of “rivalry between a historicist and a naturalistic self-image of man,” both united in rejecting the philosophy of

²⁰ O. Marquard, “Zur Geschichte des philosophischen Begriffs ‘Anthropologie’ seit dem Ende des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts” (1963, 1965, 1973), in Id., *Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie. Aufsätze*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982, pp. 122-144, here p. 134; see also Id., “Anthropologie,” in J. Ritter et al. (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 1, Basel and Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1971, coll. 362-374.

²¹ Marquard, “Zur Geschichte,” pp. 124-128. On the various meanings of the notion of nature utilized by Marquard, see A. Diemer, *Elementarkurs Philosophie. Philosophische Anthropologie*, Düsseldorf and Vienna: Econ, 1978, pp. 72-73, 225.

²² For a discussion of the relations between Heidegger’s thought and philosophical anthropology, which I cannot go into here, see the recapitulatory studies, with bibliographies, by K. Hauke, “Anthropologie bei Heidegger. Über das Verhältnis seines Denkens zur philosophischen Tradition,” *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, 105 (1998), pp. 321-345, and by M. Russo, “Animalitas. Heidegger e l’antropologia filosofica,” *Discipline filosofiche*, 12 (2002), (A. Gualandi, ed., *L’uomo. Un progetto incompiuto*, vol. 1, *Significato e attualità dell’antropologia filosofica*), pp. 167-195.

history.²³ In any event, Marquard's interpretation valorizes the motif of the sober disillusion, "this side of utopia,"²⁴ in the conception of human being and gains for philosophical anthropology "the impossibility of exhausting human destiny in the immanence of the historical process," giving the lie to "the historicist conception that human beings coincide with their historical horizon": "human existence cannot be referred totally to such immanence, since individual consciousness manifests a creativity – an inventiveness – that is anthropologically grounded."²⁵

4. *Descriptive and Normative*

The criticism – not without consequences for the birth of a historical anthropology – of the idea of a "human nature' without reference to its historical mutability and changeableness" (D. Kamper),²⁶ which combines a rebuke for the lack of historicity with a polemic against the skeptical propensity with regard to the possibilities of transforming present living conditions, is shared by the positions on philosophical anthropology that originate in the "critical theory of society." In his well-known "Remarks on philosophical anthropology" (1935), Max Horkheimer noted that the task of anthropological studies is to "extend and refine the understanding of historical tendencies. They would then be concerned with historically determined human beings and groups of human beings instead of with man as such, and would seek to understand their existence and development not as isolated individuals but rather as integral parts of the life of society." Horkheimer concentrated, then, on a critique of modern philosophical anthropology that stems from "the need to lay down new, absolute principles that provide the rationale for action," as a

²³ Schnädelbach, "Epilog: Der Mensch," pp. 272-274 [228] and see M. Russo, *La provincia dell'uomo. Studio su Helmuth Plessner e sul problema di un'antropologia filosofica*, Naples: La Città del Sole, 2000 (for an examination of Marquard's theses, pp. 32-57, and for a history of German philosophical anthropology since the eighteenth century, pp. 80-202).

²⁴ O. Marquard, "Der Mensch diesseits der Utopie. Bemerkungen zur Aktualität der philosophischen Anthropologie" (1991), in Id., *Glück im Unglück*, Munich: Fink, 1995, pp. 142-155, here pp. 154-155.

²⁵ U. Fadini, "Antropologia filosofica," in P. Rossi (ed.), *La filosofia*, vol. 1, *Le filosofie speciali*, Turin: Utet, 1995, pp. 495-523, here pp. 498-499. (For recent reconstructions of philosophical anthropology in the narrow and in the broad sense, see also: G. Arlt, *Philosophische Anthropologie*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 2001; A. Vigorelli, *L'animale eccentrico*, Milan: Guerini, 2003; M. P. Fimiani, *Antropologia filosofica*, Rome: Ed. Riuniti, 2005; G. Hartung, *Philosophische Anthropologie*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 2008; V. Rasini, *L'essere umano. Percorsi dell'antropologia filosofica contemporanea*, Rome: Carocci, 2008).

²⁶ D. Kamper, *Geschichte und menschliche Natur. Die Tragweite gegenwärtiger Anthropologie-Kritik*, Munich: Hanser, 1973, p. 11.

late attempt to find “a norm that will provide meaning to an individual’s life in the world as it currently exists [...] to show that the true conception of man lay in the goal toward which his actions were directed.”²⁷ Habermas, then, refuting the possibility of a doctrine of “anthropological constants” that he attributes to Gehlen, in the encyclopedia article cited above reaffirms that if anthropology persists in “making its object that which recurs,” always identical to itself and the presumed permanent base of human acting, then “it degenerates into an acritical discourse and ultimately leads to a dogmatics with political consequences, all the more dangerous the more it claims to be a value-free science.”²⁸ Even if, immediately afterwards, Habermas proposes the anthropology of Rothacker – as a comparative science of humanity open to the plurality of cultures (an idea not far from that of culture as a “*sensorium* of pluralities” later suggested by Marquard)²⁹ – as an alternative to Gehlen’s fallacy, which “presents determinate historical categories as ‘necessary’ from the anthropological standpoint,” and promotes a collaboration of anthropology with the “theory of society” that will permit it to understand how its own conception of human beings is connected with the conception of the society in which, “not fortuitously,” it arises.³⁰

The problem of the relation between the descriptive and the normative dimension in philosophical anthropology has, however, been discussed also in another perspective, by repositing a connection between anthropology and ethics, again under the banner of a “return to anthropology,” which comes to define a role for philosophical anthropology that is more descriptive

²⁷ M. Horkheimer, “Bemerkungen zur philosophischen Anthropologie” (1935), in Id., *Kritische Theorie*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1968, vol. 1, pp. 200–227, also published in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, *Schriften 1931–1936*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1988, pp. 249–276; [“Remarks on Philosophical Anthropology” (1935), in Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, trans. G. F. Hunter, M. S. Kramer and J. Torpey, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993, pp. 161, 154–156]. For a proposal to overcome this stylization of philosophical anthropology, also in relation to Adorno (on which see also Ch. Thies, *Die Krise des Individuums. Zur Kritik der Moderne bei Adorno und Gehlen*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1997), see B. Accarino, “Introduzione. Tra libertà e decisione: alle origini dell’antropologia filosofica,” in Accarino (ed.), *Ratio imaginis. Uomo e mondo nell’antropologia filosofica*, Florence: Ponte alle Grazie, 1991, pp. 7–63, here pp. 40–41. And, more in general, on the relations between critical theory and philosophical anthropology, see R. Wieland, “Das Gerücht über die Philosophische Anthropologie. Über einen Blindfleck ‘Kritischer Theorie,’” in Id. (ed.), *Philosophische Anthropologie der Moderne*, Basel: Weinheim, 1995, pp. 165–173.

²⁸ Habermas, “Anthropologie,” pp. 32–33.

²⁹ Marquard, “Zur Geschichte,” pp. 138–144.

³⁰ Habermas, “Anthropologie,” p. 34. On the debate with Gehlen and on the persistence of an anthropological demand in Habermas’s work up to the end of the 1960s, see W. Lepenies, “Anthropologie und Gesellschaftskritik. Zur Kontroverse Gehlen-Habermas” (1970), in Habermas and H. Nolte, *Kritik der Anthropologie. Marx und Freud, Gehlen und Habermas über Aggression*, Munich: Hanser, 1971, pp. 77–103.

than prescriptive, of an “understanding mediation between empirics and ethics,” designed to “fill the empirical gap of the ethical theories and to reduce the distance from the normative consequences in the empirical sciences.”³¹ Or, again, by working – on the basis of Karl–Otto Apel’s “transformation of philosophy” – on an engagement between philosophical anthropology and transcendental philosophy that defines the functions of the former in terms of an ascertainment of the “plausibility of the existence of ethical imperatives” (“it tells us something about the origin and the rootedness of moral norms, but is not able to answer the question of which norms must hold”) within a dialectic of possibility and validity.³²

5. *A Metaphilosophy of Philosophical Anthropology?*

In light of the examination proposed here of the diverse reflections on the “deutsche Sonderweg”³³ – on the particular course of philosophical anthropology in Germany – let us, at this point, underscore some of the features that make the phenomenon from which we set out understandable – namely, the renewed vitality and interest that this domain of research, whose supersession has long been heralded, manifests today within contemporary German thought. As we have seen, these features include: its “reactive” character, i.e., the constitutive propensity to engage with the most disparate disciplines that influence the image human beings have of themselves, whose increasing problematization is itself the mainspring that sustains the process; then, its marked, but not exclusive, propensity to concern itself with the biological sciences and human biology in particular, as well as with the various human and social sciences; the precarious equilibrium in it between the philosophical and the empirical element, within a relationship with the sciences based on interpretation and re-elaboration; then, a capacity to pose the problem of “human nature,” with various degrees of complication and contrast with respect to its historical and social dimension; and finally, its readiness to play the role of a descriptive base for ethical options, at times in an implicit and mystified form.

³¹ J.-P. Wils, “Anmerkungen zur Wiederkehr der Anthropologie,” in Wils (ed., with the collaboration of V. Pfeifer), *Anthropologie und Ethik. Biologische, sozialwissenschaftliche und philosophische Überlegungen*, Tübingen and Basel: Francke, 1997, pp. 9–40, here pp. 39–40; but see also E. König, “Ist die philosophische Anthropologie tot?,” in J. Mittelstraß and M. Riedel (eds.), *Vernünftiges Denken. Studien zur praktischen Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie*, Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1978, pp. 329–341, in particular, pp. 333–336.

³² Paetzold, “Der Mensch,” pp. 467–476.

³³ G. Gebauer, “Überlegungen zur Anthropologie. Eine Einführung,” in Id. (ed.), *Anthropologie*, Leipzig: Reclam, 1998, p. 11.

In the presence of the great – concomitant and, in part, conflictual – epochal transformations that reserve a central role for the life sciences, emphasizing (to the point of confusing the terms) the connection between artificial and natural produced by the new possibilities of technological intervention, and that lend increasing importance to the cultural dimension in individual and social life and in the organization of knowledge, philosophical anthropology has found itself in a favorable position to intercept the new requests for comprehension, thanks to the characteristics individuated here and thanks to the repertoire of themes and methods elaborated by its authors³⁴ (as a first approximation, I refer the reader to the papers that follow). As a partial confirmation of Schulz’s “diagnosis” with which I began this paper, let me add that the renewed interest in philosophical anthropology does not in fact present us today with a reproposal of essentialist anthropological constants, or a claim to derive social orders from biological traits, or a revival of systematic or doctrinal ensembles – even supposing that such notions were ever elements of philosophical anthropology. The discipline in question here seems, rather, to act in contemporary German thought as a “stimulus” or an “attitude” – indeed, as a repertoire of themes and of conceptual solutions, often taken up precisely in order to deny them; it seems to act with the tonality of melancholy sobriety and of reflection on the untimely crisis of modernity that has characterized it from the beginning and that maintains its enduring effect of warning.³⁵

6. *A Philosophical Anthropology for the Twenty-first Century*

The discourse, however, would not be complete without a consideration of the prospects for a “philosophical anthropology” for the “twenty-first century.”³⁶ We are now witnessing a sort of more recent revival of interest of the second or third generation – but without continuity of transmission from the first – that involves, on the one hand, historiographical investigation into the authors who characterized that orientation of thought and into its vicissitudes

³⁴ For the developments related to technology, which also include, in a problematic form, the work of G. Anders, see Fadini, “Antropologia filosofica,” pp. 520–521, and Id., *Sviluppo tecnologico e identità personale. Linee di antropologia della tecnica*, Bari: Dedalo, 2000.

³⁵ W. Lepenies, *Melancholie und Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972 (a new original edition was published in 1998, with a new introduction: “the end of utopia and the return of melancholy”) and Accarino, “Introduzione,” p. 52: “The ‘melancholic climate’ ought, then, to be taken [...] as an invitation to make compensation for the too many negligences that democratic culture, when blinded by a philosophically incompetent progressivism, culpably accumulated.”

³⁶ H.-P. Krüger and G. Lindemann (eds.), *Philosophische Anthropologie im 21. Jahrhundert*, Berlin: Akademie, 2006.

in the past century and, on the other, theoretical study designed to redefine its identity and to establish what its tasks are today³⁷. This double-pronged research is, moreover, coupled with a construction of connections, associations, work groups and publishing firms, so that, rather than what was once described as a “scientific community without a communication network,”³⁸ we now have a permanent and plural source of stimulation for discussions that combine life science with social science themes, science of culture with political science, ethics, philosophy of technology, biopolitics and biophilosophy. This is a new network that goes beyond the discipline’s German roots to take in other European countries – Italy first of all – and is beginning to gain ground, at least in terms of translation of the “classics,” also beyond Europe.³⁹

As a first approach, we must consider the “persistence” of this “occult orientation”: while never asserting itself fully, philosophical anthropology continued to be very much present in Germany even after World War II, when it seems to have functioned as “a vector of underground continuity” capable of broad influence. It linked up, for example, with phenomenology, whose general movement of “concretization” it shares (think of H. Schmitz and H. Blumenberg) and with the philosophy of culture, in particular in the

³⁷ Among others, see the series “Philosophische Anthropologie. Themen und Positionen”, edited by J. Fischer *et al.* (8 vols foreseen, 2008–2010), whose first volume is *Philosophische Anthropologie. Ursprünge und Aufgaben*, edited by A. Neschke and H. R. Sepp, Nordhausen, T. Bautz, 2008.

³⁸ See K.-S. Rehberg, “Verwandte Antipoden. Helmuth Plessner und Arnold Gehlen – eine Porträtskizze,” in H. Pfusterschmid-Hardtensein (ed.), *Was ist der Mensch? Menschenbilder im Wandel*, Vienna: Ibero, 1994, pp. 122–138.

³⁹ For fuller information, see the websites of the societies and the study centers dedicated to Gehlen, Plessner and Scheler, as well as to philosophical anthropology, be it evolutionistic or historical, and the links that branch off from them: <<http://www.uni-potsdam.de/u/philosophie/hpg/>>; <<http://www.tu-dresden.de/phfis/>>; <<http://www.max-scheler.de/>>; <<http://www.klostermann.de/gehlen/ausgabe.htm>>; <<http://www.eva.mpg.de/english/index.htm>>; <http://www.tu-dresden.de/phfis/Phil%20A/Arbeitskreis_Philosophische_Anthropologie_und_Soziologie.html>; <<http://www.ewi-psy.fu-berlin.de/einrichtungen/arbeitsbereiche/antewi/>>. In Berlin, Akademie has recently begun yearly publication of the *Internationales Jahrbuch für Philosophische Anthropologie*, edited by B. Accarino, J. de Mul and H.-P. Krüger, the first volume of which is *Expressivität und Stil*, edited by Accarino and M. Schloßberger, Berlin: Akademie, 2008; for a number of years Akademie has also been publishing the series *Philosophische Anthropologie*, edited by H.-P. Krüger and G. Lindemann (<<http://www.akademie-verlag.de/>>). Forthcoming is also the new journal [*mensch*]. *Internationale Zeitschrift für philosophische Anthropologie / International Journal for Philosophical Anthropology* edited by H. Delitz, Ch. Illies and R. Seyfert (<<http://www.tu-dresden.de/phfis/mensch/%5bmensch%5d.html>>). For a panorama of the Italian studies, see also the collections (and the works of the various authors included in them): M. T. Pansera (ed.), *Il paradigma antropologico di Arnold Gehlen*, Milan: Mimesis, 2005; A. Borsari and M. Russo (eds.), *Helmuth Plessner. Corporeità, natura e storia nell'antropologia filosofica*, Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005; *Discipline filosofiche*, 13 (2003), 1: A. Gualandi (ed.), *L'uomo. Un progetto incompiuto*, vol. 2, *Antropologia filosofica e contemporaneità*.

figure of Ernst Cassirer⁴⁰ who in his last period (*Essay on Man*, 1944; *The Myth of the State*, 1946) sought to integrate philosophical anthropology in his research program based on a permanent dialogue between natural sciences and sciences of the spirit and of culture, and also left substantial traces in fields such as psychoanalysis, medicine, and sociology (think of H. Schelsky, D. Claessens, H. Popitz and, “in a paradoxical manner,” N. Luhmann).⁴¹ In the cultural anthropology of Erich Rothacker, who produces a Diltheyan analysis of the plurality of languages and cultures and of their corresponding “lifestyles,” and in the “cultural polymorphism” theorized by Michael Landmann as a completion of man “only half completed by nature,” “creator and creature of culture,” we see the vocation of philosophical anthropology to make culture its proper object of analysis that has in its propensity for the criticism of culture (*Kulturkritik*) one of its most enduring effects and has been a major reason for its “persistent influence,” making it a point of possible convergence with other orientations, as in the case of Adorno and Gehlen, or in that of Horkheimer and Plessner.⁴²

7. *Philosophical Anthropology as a School of Thought*

But it is Joachim Fischer’s monumental, nearly 700-page work⁴³ – this systematic survey of the leading figures and works referable to philosophical anthropology, through the examination of published and unpublished works, of archives, correspondence and manuscript stocks – that provides us with the first comprehensive and richly detailed exposition of this “twentieth-century direction of thought.” While explicitly refraining from definition of the political implications and “diagnostic capacities” of philosophical anthropology,⁴⁴ the book vents an extraordinary “collecting passion” designed to reconstruct it as a thought-network with a common consciousness, in spite of all the differences in theoretical approach. Fischer’s preliminary move to circumscribe the

⁴⁰ See H.-P. Krüger, “Philosophical Anthropologies in Comparison: The Approaches of Ernst Cassirer and Helmuth Plessner,” in M. Rosengren and O. Sigurdson (eds.), *Papers of the Swedish Ernst Cassirer Society – Göteborg Universitet*, vol. 3, 2007, pp. 7-36, which arises from the recent posthumous publication of Cassirer’s writings on philosophical anthropology (E. Cassirer, *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, vol. 6, *Vorlesungen und Studien zur philosophischen Anthropologie*, Hamburg: Meiner, 2005); and M. Ferrari, “Scienza dell’uomo e scienza della cultura in Cassirer,” in Gualandi (ed.), *L’uomo. Un progetto incompiuto*, vol. 1, pp. 329-349.

⁴¹ See Raullet, *La Philosophie Allemande*, pp. 85-104.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 133-142.

⁴³ Fischer, *Philosophische Anthropologie*.

⁴⁴ See the references, *Ibid.*, notes 24 and 25, pp. 16-17.

boundless object to be reconstructed is that of distinguishing between a “philosophical anthropology” (*philosophische Anthropologie*) written in small letters, as a subdiscipline of philosophy, and a “Philosophical Anthropology” (*Philosophische Anthropologie*) written in capital letters, as a specific theoretical approach.

In the first case, we have a partition internal to philosophy that identifies an interrogation on the specific characteristics of human beings, and that since the 1920s has produced a sort of “anthropological turn” that has pervaded various philosophical currents in which the question “*was*” or “*wer ist der Mensch?*” [what or who is the human being?] has gained increasing importance.⁴⁵ Alongside the other philosophical subdisciplines, such as ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, epistemology and so forth, a sector of study has thus been consolidated that has produced a canon of authors and texts of reference reconstructing the reflections of an anthropological character throughout the history of thought, from Plato to Montaigne, from Aristotle to Feuerbach. What is more, in recent years it has proposed a series of possible combinations between different schools of thought, such as the confluence in a philosophical anthropology of Heidegger’s existential analytics and Wittgenstein’s analysis of language (Th. Rentsch), the interweaving of the phenomenology of the body with historical anthropology (G. Böhme), the convergence of conceptual instruments derived from Plessner and from Luhmann in a reflexive anthropology (G. Lindemann), and the development of a “linguistico-reconstructive” philosophical anthropology on the basis of phenomenological, naturalistic and hermeneutic theories of experience and based on action theory (M. Gutmann).⁴⁶

In the second case, by contrast, we have a theoretical program arising within the discipline so-constituted but that – Fischer maintains – has developed a common conceptual core identity that can be found in a very limited series of authors and works: Max Scheler’s *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (1928), Helmuth Plessner’s *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (1928) and, subsequently, Arnold Gehlen’s *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (1940), Erich Rothacker’s *Kulturanthropologie* (1942), and Adolf Portmann’s *Biologischen Fragmente einer Lehre vom Menschen* (1944). As a philosophical approach (*Denkansatz*), Philosophical Anthropology is endowed with a distinctive, original and unitary core beyond the internal differences between the various authors, which is to be sought essentially in Plessner’s key concept of “excentric positionality” (*exzentrische Positionalität*), i.e., the capac-

⁴⁵ A glance at the eighty-or-so articles in the third volume of the interdisciplinary anthropology project “Humanprojekt” at the Berlin Academy of Sciences will give a good idea of the renewed topicality of this question on the scene of German philosophy: see D. Ganten, V. Gerhardt, J.-Ch. Heilinger, J. Nida-Rümelin (eds.), *Was ist der Mensch?*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008.

⁴⁶ See Fischer, *Philosophische Anthropologie*, pp. 483–488.

ity to be simultaneously inside one’s body, to be it, and to see it from outside, to have it at one’s disposal, which makes it possible to open the human vital dimension to the potential for historical and cultural differences.⁴⁷

The reasons for the failure to recognize an autonomous school of thought with these characteristics lie, according to Fischer’s reconstruction, in three factors. The first was the heated internal rivalry between Scheler and Plessner first, and between Plessner and Gehlen later, which led to accusations of plagiarism, conspicuous ignoring of one another, persistent hostility between their students, and underestimation of the aspects common to the various doctrinal expositions. The second factor is to be sought in the efforts of theories in competition with Philosophical Anthropology, as was the case with Heidegger and with critical theory, to undermine any recognition of its core identity and exploit the internal divisions between its leading figures. Finally, the third element was represented by the transfer after World War II of the “enemy brothers-in-arms” Plessner and Gehlen to professorships of sociology, leaving freedom of action in the philosophy field to their adversaries. The strongpoint of Fischer’s volume, and its most analytic part, is thus constituted by the restitution in a unitary form of the entire checkered history of Philosophical Anthropology, chronologically, from its genesis on the threshold of the 1920s, through its various phases of break-ups, consolidations, turbulences, successions and drifts, up to its eclipsing after the mid-1970s. In this way it becomes possible to acquire a huge amount of information, not only on the leading players but on all those who were involved in various ways in this history, and about whom up to now there has been a great deal of confusion and wavering over who was to be included.⁴⁸

If Fischer’s reconstruction does not take into consideration the renewed interest in Philosophical Anthropology that has taken place since the 1990s (of which, arguably, it is itself a part), it nevertheless derives from the identification of a strong conceptual identity of this *Denkansatz* the possibility of distinguishing it from other approaches in contemporary thought, such as phenomenology, critical theory, systems theory, evolutionism, the philosophy of existence and transcendental philosophy, hermeneutics, and so forth.⁴⁹ And it also intends to transform this comparison into a tool of comparative analysis of contemporary society and of its most significant phenomena.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ See *Ibid.*, pp. 515–599, and Fischer’s paper below.

⁴⁸ See the nine chapters of the first part, *Ibid.*, pp. 19–478: 1919–1927, 1927/1928, 1928–1934, 1934–1944, 1945–1950, 1950–1955, 1955–1960, 1961–1969, 1969–1975.

⁴⁹ See *Ibid.*, pp. 586–594, and Fischer’s paper below.

⁵⁰ As an example of the way of proceeding that compares the results of Philosophical Anthropology, here too in the name of “excentric positionality,” with those of other sociological approaches (rational choice theory, systems theory, cultural studies, critical theory, gender studies, semiotics,

8. *Philosophical Anthropology as a "Politics of Life"*

Hans-Peter Krüger's interpretation is in sharp contrast with this unitary reconstruction. Krüger credits Gehlen's "stylization" of himself as "systematic founder" in 1957 and Habermas's critique in 1958 with the spread of the idea that the diverse philosophical anthropologies of Scheler, Plessner and Gehlen constituted a current or, at least, an approach of unitary thought. This – Krüger claims – is an erroneous bringing back to unity, a "false uniforming," that simplified the access to the three different philosophical anthropologies in question – in terms of history of the effects, to Gehlen's advantage – and led to a devaluation of phenomenological anthropology on the whole, as "thought linked to the philosophy of the subject."⁵¹ Bucking this trend, the 1990s witness the attempt to set out anew from the systematic development of Plessner's philosophical anthropology alone,⁵² in order to cover the deficit of contemporary thought in the domain of the philosophy of nature. Krüger's own work fits into this movement, where Plessner's philosophical anthropology is seen as a way of exiting the limits of the analysis of language and of hermeneutics. What is more, it is reconstructed as a phenomenology of nature in close encounter with American classical pragmatism to confront the new challenges of the life sciences and of human history, but without retreating in the face of the critique and the decentralization of the subject, making Plessner's philosophy comparable to those of Foucault and Derrida.⁵³

This selective reading of twentieth-century tradition – that links Plessner and a critical revival of Scheler above all with Dewey, Cassirer and Hannah Arendt – also delineates a series of tasks for philosophical anthropology as a "politics of life" that is called upon to undertake a redefinition of what is specifically human, both in the vertical sense of anthropogenesis and of comparison with the evolution of primates, on the basis of the most recent findings of the neurobiological studies on the brain and on comparative human-animal behavior, and in the horizontal and ethnological sense of the analysis of diverse cultures, in search of the premises of human vital practice.⁵⁴

and discourse analysis), see the analysis of Berlin's Potsdamer Platz as a "place of modernity" – thus comparing also the result of a strong philosophical procedure, the extraction of a conceptual core identity, with a weak procedure, the "ring-around-the-rose" of theories, all more or less on the same plane – in J. Fischer and M. Makropoulos (eds.), *Potsdamer Platz. Soziologische Theorien zu einem Ort der Moderne*, Munich: Fink, 2004.

⁵¹ H.-P. Krüger, "Anthropologie, philosophische," in S. Gosepath, W. Hinsch and B. Rössler (eds.), *Handbuch der Politischen Philosophie und Sozialphilosophie*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008.

⁵² See J. Beaufort, "Plessner lesen," *Information Philosophie*, 1, 2003, pp. 40-50.

⁵³ See H.-P. Krüger, *Zwischen Lachen und Weinen*, 2 vols, Berlin: Akademie, 1999-2001.

⁵⁴ See H.-P. Krüger, *Gehirn, Verhalten und Zeit. Philosophische Anthropologie als Lebenspolitik*, Berlin: Akademie, 2008.

9. On the Texts that Follow

The second direction of analysis concerns some of the principal currents on the scene of contemporary German philosophy in which we can recognize a relationship of indirect continuity, of re-elaboration and, at all events, of critical engagement with a part, or the whole, of its legacy: historical anthropology, combining history of mentality, philosophical anthropology and social and cultural anthropology (Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, both of the Berlin Freie Universität),⁵⁵ social philosophy in the context of the continuation of critical theory in the sense of the “struggle for recognition” (Axel Honneth, University of Frankfurt am Main),⁵⁶ the engagement with pragmatism through the analysis of the “specter of human phenomena” (Hans-Peter Krüger, University of Potsdam), and, finally, the philosophy of culture, as the art of compensation and of resignation (Franz Joseph Wetz, University of Gmünd).⁵⁷

(Translated from the Italian by Giacomo Donis)

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⁵⁵ For a preliminary survey of the production connected with the Berlin Zentrum für Historische Anthropologie, see at least: Ch. Wulf and D. Kamper (eds.), *Logik und Leidenschaft. Erträge Historischer Anthropologie*, Berlin: Reimer, 2002; Wulf, *Anthropologie. Geschichte, Kultur, Philosophie*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2004; Wulf, *Anthropologie kultureller Vielfalt. Interkulturelle Bildung in Zeiten der Globalisierung*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2006.

⁵⁶ The interest in philosophical anthropology of the current director of the Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung goes back at least to the critical survey: A. Honneth and H. Joas, *Soziales Handeln und menschliche Natur. Anthropologische Grundlagen der Sozialwissenschaften*, Frankfurt am Main and New York: Campus, 1980; [*Social Action and Human Nature*, trans. R. Meyer, forward by Ch. Taylor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985] and continues up to his most recent analysis of the “pathologies of the social,” Honneth, *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit. Aufsätze zur praktischen Philosophie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000; [*Disrespect: the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, trans. J. Ganahl, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007], regarding which see also the journal *WestEnd* <<http://www.ifs.uni-frankfurt.de/westend/index.htm>>.

⁵⁷ See, by Marquard’s former student F. J. Wetz, *Kunst der Resignation*, Munich: Dtv, 2003 (on the art of resignation); *Die Magie der Musik*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2004 (on music as “consolation”); *Illusion Menschenwürde*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2005 (on the illusion of human dignity); *Haben Embryonen Würde?*, Dortmund: Humanitas, 2007 (on the status of human embryos).