

## CULTURE AGAINST MAN?!

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*Abstract. Culture is far from being one, it is infinitely diverse, as well in time as in space.*

*Only if it is perceived as un-diverse it can be a force against man, not every man, but only that one which did not understand and accept the human diversity.*

Thomas Henry Huxley, it will be remembered, had called the question of man "the question of questions." This question had been central to European thought, more or less continuously since the eighteenth century. It remained at the center of twentieth-century thought, but now with an important difference. In the words of the German philosopher Max Scheler, "man [had become] more of a problem to himself now than ever before in all recorded history."<sup>i</sup>

E.M. Forster, the English novelist, said just the opposite. "Man," he wrote in an essay on English prose, "is beginning to understand himself better and to explore his own contradictions."<sup>iii</sup>

He attributed this better understanding to the "psychological movement," including Freud, which Forster thought had brought new subtlety and depth to the portrayal of human nature, and thus greatly enriched the art of fiction. The difference between these two views is perhaps more apparent than real. However, Scheler's view than man had

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become more problematic represents more truly the new trend, and especially the new mood, in the twentieth-century thought about man.

Of the continuing centrality of the question itself, there is no doubt whatever. The literature dealing with man between 1914 and midcentury is enormous by any standards. Philosophical anthropology, defined as the study or science of man to distinguish it from cultural anthropology, blossomed as an intellectual discipline after World War I, and produced important studies by Scheler himself, Ernst Cassirer, and others. Dubbing the twentieth century the "psychological era" of history, Otto Rank, one of the early Freudian group, called attention to the simultaneous vogue of psychology, and especially the new science of psychoanalysis. Famous lecture series addressed themselves to the problem of man, such as Scheler's lectures at Hebrew University Jerusalem, in 1938 {What is Man?}, and the Gifford Lectures of Reinhold Niebuhr in 1939. Above all, one thinks of the almost endless procession of volumes on "the nature and destiny of man," "the human condition," "the stature of man," "modern man in search of a soul," and the like, and of the many new images of man evoked by contemporary artists.

But why should man have become so problematic? Cassirer suggests one reason. There was no longer any "central power," theology, metaphysics, science, or whatever that was capable of providing a frame of reference to which differences of viewpoint, inevitable in any case, might be referred. Nor was there any generally accepted principle, even within special fields of knowledge, such as psychology.

Huxley suggested another reason. Answers to the question of questions changed own time the new accession was Darwinism. In the twentieth century one such accession was the psychoanalytical movement. Problematic man, however, traces more to the new human condition than to anarchy of thought about human nature. In his Jerusalem lectures, Martin Buber listed several of the most important reasons why the "anthropological problem" became insistent in the twentieth century. One was cosmic, and another was sociological. In times when man loses his traditional image of the universe, as had happened recently, he feels insecure and homeless, "and hence problematic to himself."

The problem is compounded when, with the decay of old organic forms of community, man simultaneously loses his "sociological security" and is thrown back on his solitude. The psychiatrist Franz Alexander expressed it this way: periods of economic expansion and prosperity, when social organization is relatively successful, are "periods of extraverted scientific interest"; but in periods like the present (post-1914), of relatively acute pain and social distress, the intellect focuses "upon the center of the trouble, man himself."<sup>iii</sup> Buber also did not fail to point out the new paradox of "man's lagging behind his works," of his greatly increased power through technology, yet at the same time his powerlessness and destructiveness in dealing with the enormous political and economic problems he faced.

Of course, older types or images of man persisted along with the new, and not all the new images were equally problematic. Under the circumstances, however, it is hardly surprising that the "classical" image, already under pressure since Darwinian days, should have come further man, should

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lack the clarity and self-confidence of the older image in its glory days. This problematic strain in man's new conception of himself can be illustrated best by pursuing certain themes, which crop up repeatedly in the literature bearing on the subject. These are the themes, not necessarily always to be found together, of epistemological despair, relativism (with respect to human nature), and self-depreciation. None of those themes went uncontested, as we shall see.

Epistemological despair means despair of ever finding out who "man" is. The litterateurs expressed it overtly, though it was implied, to say the least, in the crisis of knowledge perceived by certain contemporary philosophers, chiefly the logical positivists and philosophers of science<sup>iv</sup>.

Man is unnameable in Samuel Beckett's novel by that title: man, the self, himself, whom Beckett goes in search of and cannot find, just as he had previously searched for Godot (God?). "Where now? Who now? When now?" - the book begins with the spatial and temporal questions, man asks in order to identify himself. "I, of whom I know nothing," he concludes; "... there is no name for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that, that, it's kind of pronoun too, it isn't that either, I'm not that either."<sup>v</sup> Beckett had been ringing changes on this theme, in his novels and plays, ever since his youthful book on Marcel Proust. In fact, it all went back to Proust - and to Bergson. Bergson had recognized the problem of multiple selves and the difficulty of putting them together to form a whole self. He was optimistic: by introspection it was possible, though never easy, to find the underlying self, which endures, even while changing, and which unites present with past states of mind in an organic whole. Proust was less optimistic. Save for rare privileged

moments, people did not understand themselves or others, and this was because personalities were multiple, and forever changing, and putting up false fronts.

This epistemological despair obsessed and baffled a whole generation of European writers from Proust to Beckett. The result was a new form of literature in which, as Nathalie Sarraute explained in one of her critical essays, author, characters, and readers all lived together in a new "age of suspicion." Author and reader had become wary of solid forms, thanks largely to the profuse growth of the psychological world, which destroyed all "usual motives and accepted meanings," and in the end created total skepticism, even of the psychological itself.

Consequently, "the character" so solid in the traditional novel, still relatively solid even in *The Remembrance of Things Past*, "lost that most precious of all possessions, his personality... and frequently, even his name."<sup>vi</sup> Not only Beckett but many of the best known figures of contemporary European literature wrote despairingly (though sometimes also comically) of a vanishing self, an incoherent self, a decentralized self, of a self that possibly did not even exist. "It seems to me sometimes that I do not really exist, but that I merely imagine I exist. The thing that I have the greatest difficulty in believing in, is my own reality": thus Edouard muses in his secret journal in Andre Gide's novel *The Counterfeiters* (1925). Man looks into a mirror and sees reflected there a stranger - or else so many faces that he is utterly confused: "the stranger inseparable from myself" is how Moscarda puts it in Luigi Pirandello's novel *One, None, and a Hundred*

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Thousand (1933). The soul detective in Eugene Ionesco's play *Victims of Duty* (1952) arrives at a flat to inquire of the present occupants how the previous tenant spelled his name. He spelled it "Mallot," says the husband, though he admits to not having known him. How, then, do you know it was spelled with a "t" rather than a "d," the detective asks reasonably. "Why, yes, of course, you're right," answered Choubert. "How do I know? How do I know?... How do I know?... I don't know how I know." The detective himself, though proud of being "Aristotelianly logical," is likewise baffled. He never finds what he is looking for, nor do Beckett's "detectives," Watt, Malone, an Molloy, or the soul detective in Sarraute's *The Unknouwn Man*. "Personality doesn't exist," says Ionesco's commentator on the modern theater. "The characters lose their form in the formlessness of becoming."<sup>vii</sup>

Relativism, the next theme to be considered, is less skeptical. Relativism does not deny the existence of self (of at least of a derivative self) nor does it despair of finding and defining it. On the other hand, relativism posits the infinite plasticity of the human self, or personality, which it sees as the effect of historical and cultural conditioning. Thus, there is no fixed human nature. Man is in large part what others make him. The qualities that characterize man are relative to a certain kind of society, education, and environment. He is problematic in the sense that he is no one thing: his nature varies according to his nurture, which, in turn, varies according to the time, place, and culture. The impetus to this relativistic anthropology came mainly from three groups, the bahaviorists and behavioral scientists, the cultural anthropologists, and the left wing of the Freudian movement.

All three groups, in their several ways, stressed sociology, as much or more than biology; that is, they stressed the social, and therefore the changing and variable determinants of personality and behavior. By so doing, they shattered the age-old view of a fixed, or ideal, nature of man. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim had insisted years before in his critique of a "classical" education that there was no such thing as an "ideal nature of man," always and everywhere the same. Modern youth should be instructed in the reverse doctrine, inculcated by "the teachings of history" that "humanity, far from being one, it is infinitely diverse, as well in time as in space."<sup>viii</sup> This view was implicit in nineteenth-century historicism, as Durkheim well knew, but was now carried further by anthropologists and psychologists, who had the opportunity to observe vastly different personalities in different cultures.

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Scheler M. *Man's Place in Nature* (Die Stellung des Menschen tin Kosmos, 1928). Boston: Beacon Press, 1966. P.3. Martin Heidegger said very much the same thing in 1929: "Keiner Zeit ist der Mensch so fragwürdig geworden wier der unsrigen" (Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik. Bonn, 1929. P.200). See also Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, Chap. I. Scheler was named professor of philosophy at the University of Cologne in 1919.

<sup>ii</sup> Forster E.M. *Two Cheers for Democracy*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951.Pp.274-275.

<sup>iii</sup> Alexander F. *Our Age of Unreason*. Philadelphia, 1942. p.25.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid*. P.388-389.

<sup>v</sup> Beckett S. Molloy, *Malone Dies, and The Unnameable*. New York: Grove Press, 1959. P.562. The Unnameable was published in 1953.

<sup>vi</sup> Sarraute N. *The Age of Suspicion. Essays on the Novel*. New York, 1963. p.55. Sarraute's essay "L'Ere du soupcon" first appeared in *Temps Modernes* in 1950.

<sup>vii</sup> Ionesco E. *Victims of Duty* in: *Plays*. Vol. II. London, 1962. pp.274, 308.

<sup>viii</sup> Durkheim E. *L'evolution pedagogique en France*. Vol. II. Paris, 1938, p. 194.