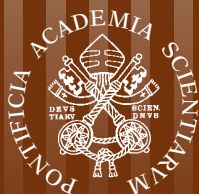


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The Status of the Human Being in the Age of Science

MARCELO SÁNCHEZ SORONDO



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At the end of his laborious journey in the labyrinth of the transcendental 'I', his Critique of Pure Reason, Kant confessed, with the frankness of an ancient Stoic, to a deep feeling of expectation: 'The whole interest of reason (both speculative and practical) is centred in the three following questions: 1. What can I know? 2. What should I do? 3. What may I hope?'.¹ And taking up these questions again in his later *Logik*, he added as a fourth question: 'what is man?' In ultimate terms, he added, and his clarification was new and of an essential value, 'all of these answers could be attributed to anthropology because the first three questions are related to the last, namely: what is man?'.²

These questions made anthropology the privileged place for the search for truth and made Kant one of the most radical and brilliant thinkers and at the same time one of the most problematic. The laborious analyses of *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, which Kant wanted to categorise as 'metaphysics', led to him being lost in a labyrinth which ends with more questions than

¹ Kant, Immanuel, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 805. B 832 (ed. Reclam, Leipzig 1956, p. 818); *The Critique of Pure Reason*. English translation available from Internet (with my adjustments): <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/kant/immanuel/k16p/k16p95.html>

² Kant, Immanuel, *Werke*, hrsg. von E. Cassirer et al., XI Bände, Berlin 1912-22, Bd. VIII, p. 343 f. In the preface of the *Anthropologie in Pragmatiker Hinsicht* of the same year (1800) he declared: 'the most important object (*der wichtiger Gegenstand*) of all the research in the field of culture is man' (Cassirer, VIII, p. 3).

answers. However, he does not surrender but appeals – probably under the influence of Hume’s notion of ‘feeling’ which gave vitality and value to ‘impressions’ – to profound conviction and experience. As he manages to state in the famous text of *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*: ‘two things fill my spirit with an ever new and increasing admiration and veneration, the more my reflection increases: the starry sky above me and the moral law inside me’.³ He has no uncertainty or doubt: ‘I see them both before me and I connect them immediately with consciousness of my existence’. Two fundamental experiences and thus two paths of openness to the Infinite: each one with the same anthropological point of departure but with different directions that have become today, with the development of contemporary physics, astrophysics, biology and neurology, of particular significance and contemporary relevance. Kant explained all of this after what he himself called the revolution in physics of Copernicus and Galileo.⁴ We will now go over what Kant suggests to us.

The first pathway, he explains, begins with the place that I occupy with my body and brain in the sensible external world and enlarges the connection in which I find myself in ‘an unending greatness with world after world and system after system: and even more in the unlimited times of their periodic movement, their beginning and their duration’. This experience is the pathway of reflection on nature which leads the spirit – admired and lost but nonetheless proud of its awareness of the infinite – beyond the horizon of the visible world.

The second pathway, namely the experience of the moral law, begins with ‘my invisible, that is to say from consciousness of my personhood, and represents me in a world which has’ – and here the point should be stressed – ‘true infinitude, but which only the intellect can penetrate and by which (and thus also at the same time as all these visible worlds) I know myself in a connection, not as is the case there [in the experience of the starry sky above me], which is simply accidental, but, rather, which is universal and necessary’. In the human being the point of intersection between the two experiences or spectacles – however you wish to call them

³ Kant, Immanuel, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, (ed. Felix Meiner, Hamburg 1990, p. 289); *The Critique of Practical Reason*. English translation available from Internet (with my adjustments): <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/ikcpr10.txt>

⁴ Kant, Immanuel, *Kritik d.r. Vernunft*; English translation, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, preface to the second edition (1787). Available from Internet: <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/kant/immanuel/k16p/k16p2.html>

– is striking and revealing of the true infinity, although by participation, of the human spirit, that is to say, of the intellective soul at its centre.

The first spectacle, Kant explains, is that of an innumerable quantity of worlds, whose magnitude, as we are told by contemporary astrophysics, amounts to millions and hundreds of millions of light years (a light year is equal to 9,460 milliard kilometres), and is analogous in contrast with that proposed by the microphysics of sub-nuclear particles which enables us to see the duration of a measurement of a hundredth of a thousandth of a milliard of a milliard of a second and energies of a level of milliards of milliards of an electron volt. Thus Kant can well say that this spectacle of infinite magnitudes ‘completely annuls my importance as an *animal creature*, who must return once again to the planet (a mere point in the universe) that matter of which he was formed, after being provided for a short time (without knowing how) of a vital force’. We can say that the extreme nearness that seems to be created between the primary forces of the cosmos and the ultimate particles of matter indicates that man finds himself, as a body, a participant in the creation, of which he, too, in his earthly adventure, is an element and a moment – both in the complex structures of the laboratories of science and in the humble events of daily life.

The second spectacle, instead, ‘infinitely raises my spirit in the sense of an *intelligence* through my personhood whose moral law manifests to me a life that is independent of our being animals and also of the entire living universe, at least as regards what one can understand from what is determined in conformity with the ends of my existence through this moral law, whose indications are not confined to the conditions and the limits of this life, but, rather, which extend to the infinite’.⁵

Such for Kant is the grave and irreplaceable task of philosophy as ‘practical wisdom’ (*Weisheit*): to interpret, on the outside, the truth of being of the presence of greatness in constant expansion of the physical world and life, and, on the inside, the depths of freedom as the truth of being of man. And thus the soul emerges as a subject that is possessed and is presented as the I, as itself, and thus as spirit, beginning with which the self can be said to be an agent and suffering.

The first spectacle or experience is the pathway of science, in particular beginning with the ‘Copernican revolution’ as Kant himself called it, aware as he was of the new direction taken by Copernicus and Galileo. The

⁵ *Loc. cit.*

other spectacle or experience is the pathway of 'knowing yourself' which Heraclitus glimpsed in the *Logos* and Aristotle identified in the human intellect which was 'capable of becoming and doing everything',⁶ as an overcoming of the naturalistic physicism of the Pre-Socratics. The two spectacles or experiences intertwine in man.

It follows from these two spectacles or experiences that man's knowledge is not a matter of a single plane or level – that of external observation, explanation, and experimentation (as a reproduction of phenomena) which is the pathway of modern science. This knowledge develops in the interface between the natural observation of science and the reflective understanding of philosophy. The human being is simultaneously an observable being, like all the beings of nature in which he participates, and a being who interprets himself, who knows himself as Heraclitus and later Socrates had already suggested (a 'self-interpreting being' to employ the definition of Charles Taylor or Paul Ricœur).

This statement on these two objective levels of knowledge that combine in man, the one of the external world which is the object of science and the one inside him, which has the I as its leader, can provide an answer of reconciliation and pacification to the question raised by the status of the human being in the field of knowledge in the age of the predominance of science, as long as, that is, positivist ideology does not claim the right to abolish the border between the sciences of nature and the sciences of man and to annex the latter to the former.

With this spirit we can reconcile a conflict – that connected with the science of genetic mutations or heredity, which, although discovered (and let us not forget the point) by the Augustinian monk G. Mendel (1822-1884), were, after Darwin (1809-1882), frequently linked to the theories of evolution. No external limit can be imposed on the hypothesis according to which random variations and given changes have been established and reinforced within the 'narrow corridor of evolution' in order to ensure the survival of a species, and thus of the human species as well. Hitherto we have had historical and perhaps phylogenetic evidence, therefore something more than a hypothesis to employ the famous phrase of John Paul II, in relation to which the experimental sciences must apply greater empirical rigour.

Philosophy, in turn, and not only philosophy but also the social sciences open to the natural sciences, must not engage in a battle, which is

⁶ *De Anima*, III, 5, 430 a 14-16.

lost from the outset, to establish the natural facts. Philosophy should ask itself how it can find a meeting point with the scientific point of view, starting from the position according to which the human being is already a speaking, questioning being. A human being, therefore, who has given himself some answers that speak of his domain of freedom in relation to given nature. While the scientist follows the descending order of species and brings out the uncertain, contingent and improbable aspects of the results of evolution in man, the philosopher starts from the self-interpretation of man's intellectual, moral and spiritual situation and ascends back through the course of evolution to the sources of life and of being that man himself is. The starting point can still be the original question, which has always been latent with a sort of self-referentiality of principle: moral law for Kant is what makes the difference; freedom is what Hegel calls 'the essence of the spirit'.⁷

The human being, discovered and recognised to himself as moral and free, can legitimately ask himself how he arose from animal nature. Thus the approach is retrospective and retraces the chain of mutations and variations. This retrospective approach meets the other, progressive, approach, which descends the river of the progeny of the human being – man and woman. The two approaches intersect at a point: the birth of a symbolic and spiritual world where knowledge, moral law and achieved freedom define the humanity of man.

The confusion that has to be avoided lies in the two meanings that can be attributed to the term 'origin': the meaning of genetic or horizontal derivation and the meaning of ontological or vertical foundation. One refers to the origin of species in the succession of space and time beginning with an already originated datum; the other poses the question about the appearance of participated being beginning with the Being by essence. This is the first origin of the being that is the 'passage' of the being from nothing to being which is not properly a passage but rather the primary origin of the being that emerges from nothing thanks to the act of participated being: *'Ex hoc quod aliquid est ens per participationem, sequitur quod sit causatum ab alio'*, i.e. 'from the fact that a thing has being by participation, it follows that it is caused'.⁸ Hence the complete formula of the creation as participation (passive in the creature and active in God): *'Necesse est dicere omne ens, quod quocumque modo est, a Deo esse'*, i.e. 'It

⁷ *Enz.*, § 482.

⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, I, q. 44, a. 1 ad 1.

must be said that every being that in any way is, is from God'.⁹ Essential in this vertical 'origin' is the analogical decentring towards the profound, or rather, towards the self of each person, and the analogical recentring upwards, namely towards God. This was also observed by St. Thomas in his late work: '*Deus est et tu: sed tuum esse est participatum, suum vero essentiale*' i.e. 'God is and you [are]: but your being is participated, His is the essential being'.¹⁰

The passage from simple being as an *animal creature*, to use the phrase of Kant, towards the metaphysical dignity of spiritual being analogous to that of God, is founded on man's dignity as '*forma per se subsistens*', that is, intellective soul, transcendent I, thanks to the direct belonging of the intellective soul to being (*esse*) or to the participated act of being (*actus essendi*).¹¹ St Thomas is very determined on this which is the most original point of his anthropology but little known to modern philosophy: 'when the foundation of matter is removed – as in the spiritual substance and in the human soul –, if any form of a determinate nature remains which subsists of itself but not in matter, it will still be related to its own being (*esse*) as potency is to act. But I do not say, as that potency which is separable from its act, but as a potency which is always accompanied by its act'. He thus concludes that even in spiritual creatures there is a metaphysical 'composition of potency and act'.¹²

⁹ *Ibid.*, *S. Th.*, I, q. 44, a. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, *In Psalmum XXXIV*.

¹¹ '*Ipse Deus, qui est esse tantum, est quodammodo species omnium formarum subsistentium quae esse participant et non sunt suum esse*', i.e. 'God Himself, who is only being, is in a certain way the species of all subsistent forms that participate in being and are not being itself' (St. Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 6, a. 6 ad 5).

¹² '*Unde in rebus compositis est considerare duplicem actum, et duplicem potentiam. Nam primo quidem materia est ut potentia respectu formae, et forma est actus eius; et iterum natura constituta ex materia et forma, est ut potentia respectu ipsius esse, in quantum est susceptiva eius. Remoto igitur fundamento materiae, si remaneat aliqua forma determinatae naturae per se subsistens, non in materia, adhuc comparabitur ad suum esse ut potentia ad actum: non dico autem ut potentiam separabilem ab actu, sed quam semper suus actus comitetur. Et hoc modo natura spiritualis substantiae, quae non est composita ex materia et forma, est ut potentia respectu sui esse; et sic in substantia spirituali est compositio potentiae et actus*' (*De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 1 co.). Cf. *Disputed questions on spiritual creatures*. English translation available from Internet (with my adjustments): <http://diafrica.org/kenny/CDtexts/QDdeSpirCreat.htm>

The conclusion that can be drawn from this very lofty speculative reflection by St Thomas is that the dignity of being spirit is characterised by Kant, Hegel and others (such as Wittgenstein) after the Galilean revolution in convergence with St Thomas: in modern thought through the transcendentalism of knowledge, of freedom, of moral law and of language that have the self as their leader; in St Thomas these transcendentalities, like the self as well, are founded in the act of being and its necessary belonging to the (finite) spirit is obtained by means of the direct participation of God. Therefore, each single subsistence, as Kierkegaard also showed, has his vertical origin as a created person. Thus man is 'capable of God', as is rightly observed at the beginning of the Compendium of the Catechism promulgated by Pope Benedict XVI.

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Two things fill my spirit with an ever new and increasing admiration and veneration, the more my reflection increases: the starry sky above me and the moral law inside me.

Immanuel Kant,
The Critique of Practical Reason