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Man as subject or project

This contribution will submit the hypothesis according to which we are about to change our attitude in the face of the world we live in. Ever since history proper began (ever since the second millennium BC), we have assumed ourselves to stand both inside and outside of the world – to be both part of the objective world and subjects of it. This contradictory anthropology led to the curious division between body and mind with all its intricate insoluble problems. Although in the course of history this contradiction has taken numerous shapes (the last being the separation between the natural sciences and the humanities), none of these formulations of the double position of man has provided a satisfactory answer to the questions concerning our relation to the world (our understanding, evaluation and manipulation of it). It now appears that no satisfactory answers were possible, because this contradictory anthropology poses false problems. A new anthropology is slowly emerging, and I will attempt to consider some of its aspects in light of the theme 'Man versus environment', which is the subject of our meeting.

History proper may be said to have begun when some people on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean began to ask questions about what we now call ek-sistence (the fact that we are somehow capable of looking at the world from outside, and even of looking at ourselves as we look at the world from outside). Of course, people had looked at the world from the outside ever since they started making pictures of it, ever since they started making cave paintings. But they had taken this curious capacity to step back from the world for granted, and they did not ask questions about

it. Around the second half of the second millennium BC, these questions could no longer be avoided, possibly because techniques like metal production had reached a degree of complexity that demanded a new degree of abstraction. By the beginning of the first millennium BC, two separate answers to that question were being formulated. One stemmed from Greek philosophy, the other from Jewish prophecy, and these two types of answers were repeatedly combined and recombined to form the basis of Occidental knowledge, values and action. Although there is a profound difference between these two types of answers, and although no true synthesis between them is possible, they both agree that man is somehow a stranger in the world (an alien coming from somewhere else), and that there are methods for him to overcome this alienation. This is why the title of our meeting 'Man versus environment' is a typically Occidental expression.

One of the results of this self-understanding of man (possibly the most important) is Occidental science. In its modern form this poses the question of how man can adequate his thinking to the environment he lives in (adaequatio rei cogitantis ad rem extensam). It appears that the structure of our thinking is quite different to the structure of our environment (including the structure of our bodies). Our thinking is clear and distinct (it has an arithmetical structure), whilst the environment is compact (it has a geometric structure). Efforts were made to render those two structures compatible, analytical geometry being the most efficient method, and this was improved upon by calculus, which finally permitted man to understand his environment (including his own body), and to manipulate it. This is the basis of the first and second Industrial Revolutions. However, although these methods of knowledge and manipulation were extremely powerful and successful, there has always been something uncanny about them. How can it be that our thinking (in fact, the equations and formulae we elaborate) does indeed function when applied to our surroundings? Why, indeed, do the numbers we draw on a blackboard permit us to build bridges? Why are the laws of nature algorithms? The first attempt to explain these uncanny facts was to say that the world is the product of a mind similar to our own – that God is a mathematician. However, somewhat later on, we began to suspect that this curious God (not such a perfect mathematician after all, if we look more closely at the world) might be our own projection – that it is we ourselves who project our thinking onto the world and then rediscover it, as if we had forgotten that we projected it there in the first place. Or, that the laws of nature are not really our discoveries, but rather our own projections. And this suspicion questions the whole of Occidental anthropology, its epistemology and all of the values implied therein. No longer is it a question of 'Man versus environment', but rather it is now a question of 'Man and environment projects'.

One point should be made clear from the start. If we suspect that it is we ourselves who project the rules according to which the environment (the objective world) behaves, this does not justify 'idealism' in the sense that we dream up the objective world. Because, if the world were a dream of ours, any old rule would be just as good as another. This is obviously not the case: the rules we

project must somehow adapt themselves to what is there, and some of the rules we try to project are shown to be erroneous. 'Idealism' in this sense is nothing but an extreme form of Occidental anthropology, the other extreme being 'realism'. Both must be abandoned. What we have to assume, if we adopt the suspicion of our being the projects of rules, is that there are impossible projects.

Having said this, let us try to determine what science itself has to say about it. Take neurophysiology as an example. It says that the tips of some of our nerves receive stimuli in what we now call a 'digital code', point-like impulses that are either received or not, and that there is no strong or weak stimulus, but only either stimulus or non-stimulus. These point-like impulses are processed by the nervous system to form perceptions of the world. Thus, the objective world, as perceived, is a computation of the nervous system and, in this sense, a projection of it. And all our thinking, feeling, wishing and acting is based on this projection. This is a way to answer the classical paradox of how the brain, which is part of the world, may contain the world: the brain projects the world.

Very similar statements can be found in scientific disciplines quite unrelated to neurophysiology and to each other. For instance, it has become obvious in physics that observation is not neutral, but rather that it influences observed phenomena in what is called the Heisenberg factor, meaning that the object and subject of observation cannot clearly be distinguished. Another instance: it has become obvious in psychology that what we call the 'individual subject' (the Ego) is, at best, the point of an iceberg of collective psychical phenomena and, at worst, a mere convenience for psychological investigation. This means that to speak of an individual subject is to speak loosely. All of these (and other) examples suggest that we have now reached a point at which the distinction between subjects and objects of knowledge (and therefore of evaluation and action) is no longer useful, and that a new ontology and a new anthropology are called for.

In fact, Edmund Husserl's phenomenology (as refined by successive investigations) provides us with the tools necessary for such an elaboration. It says quite simply that there can be no object without a subject to observe it (no 'thing in itself'), and that there can be no subject without an object to which it is subject (no 'pure subject'). It says that 'subject' and 'object' are abstract extrapolations from concrete relations. There is no such thing as a 'human spirit' on the one side and an 'objective environment' on the other, but rather, there is a concrete 'man–environment' relation. We may call this concrete relation the 'Lebenswelt', and we may say that it has a dynamical, projective, 'intentional' structure. Let me give an example. I am sitting here at my table and typing this article. This is a concrete fact: the intention to write this. Within this intention I become concrete (realize myself) as a writer, and the table and the typewriter become concrete therein, as how the contribution is being written. Outside of this concrete relation I, the table and the typewriter are nothing but mere virtualities for the writing of this contribution. Of course, I may realize myself in some other concrete relationship (for instance, as a father or as the wearer of this shirt), and the table and the typewriter may become concrete in some other relationship, but to become concrete these virtualities

must be part of some relationship or another. All this is very simple, but difficult to grasp, because it is contrary to Occidental tradition.

Now if you consider such a field vision of the world and ourselves within it, you might begin to understand what is going on around us. You will see overlapping fields of virtualities, which are variably strewn and which become concrete according to some projects. You will see that tree yonder as one possible concretion of a specific project, and you will see yourselves as concrete knots within the network of virtualities that bundle and unbundle according to specific projects. And computer screens may help you to see this. You will see there how virtualities (electromagnetic particles, if you like) become concrete as images according to a project the structure of which you may see as a wire net, and you will see that the computer artist himself or herself becomes concrete within the image. It is no coincidence that computer screens help us to have this vision: they are themselves products of a new existential attitude that is emerging. Computers are among the tools by which we begin to assume ourselves as projects.

Let me put this attitude as follows. Unlike our ancestors, we no longer feel that we are surrounded by objects that condition us, which impose their rules upon us. We no longer feel subjected to objective conditions. We no longer believe that we must emancipate ourselves from these conditions in order to be free. We no longer hold these beliefs because it is doubtful whether the objects that surround us are given to us, or whether it is not we who have produced them, either spontaneously through our nervous system or deliberately through our intention. We no longer believe in the reality of an objective world. We no longer believe ourselves to be somehow outside of that objective world, and thus mysteriously capable of emancipating ourselves from it. We no longer believe in the reality of a self, mind or spirit. What we now begin to feel is that there are innumerable virtualities around us and within us; that there is no difference between around and within here; and that these virtualities are opportunities for us to become concrete according to specific projects. By thus realizing ourselves we also realize those next to us and the environment within which these realizations occur. Like our ancestors, we want to be free, but no longer to be from rules (which we feel we project ourselves). Now we want to be free in order to become realized and to realize worlds.

This new anthropology, in which man is an intention towards realization and the world is the result of this intention, no longer suffers from the fateful Occidental contradiction between subject and object, soul and body, mind and matter. All of these concepts are now seen to be metaphysical and must be abandoned. Instead, we should operate with terms like concrete and abstract. A phenomenon is all the more concrete the more virtualities therein have been 'computed' by projects. And it is all the more abstract the less a project has succeeded. No longer is there any difference between 'real' and 'fictitious' (between the sciences and the arts), but rather all is now a question of the degree of realization. (As computer artists say, it is a question of the density of definition.) A table is not more real than its hologram if, in the hologram, our projects become as concrete as they

do in the nervous system responsible for concrete perception of the table. For such an anthropology, there is no difference between a simulated and a simulating world. Both worlds (indeed all possible worlds) are computations of virtualities according to projects, be they spontaneous (according, for instance, to some genetic programme) or be they deliberate (according to the programmes we are beginning to establish).

If you have followed this argument, you will have seen that this new anthropology (and the ontology it involves) takes man to be a virtual constructor of himself and his worlds. If the term 'constructivism' has to have any meaning in the future, I believe that it will be precisely as meaning: we are projects for the construction of ourselves and of alternative worlds. To be sure, this article is far too brief to do justice to the point I am driving at. However, in the context of a conference with the title Constructivism: Man versus Environment, I hope my arguments will find their place, especially if I add the following statement. Instead of 'Man versus environment' we should say 'man as a project for himself within his environment'. That would be true constructivism.

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