

International Perspectives on Pragmatism

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Edited by

Peter H. Hare, Michel Weber, J.K. Swindler,
Oana-Maria Pastae and Cerasel Cuteanu

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of Peter H. Hare

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PREFACE

The pragmatist discussion on today's various and complex aspects of our society is one of high interest in contemporary philosophy, especially due to philosophers, such as Richard Rorty, whose work reactivated much of the emphasis on pragmatism lately.

In September of '08, the "Constantin Brancusi" University from Targu-Jiu, Romania, was happy to host some of the well-recognized world's philosophers at an international conference on pragmatism, society and politics.

This volume is the result of a selection of the papers presented during this conference. The topics gravitated around pragmatism and political philosophy, having, at the same time, a solid background in the history of culture.

Amongst the themes representing the focus of this international gathering, we would mention a few that are very interesting for recent discussion: democracy and pragmatism, liberalism and democracy as traditions of modernity, liberalism and Marxism, democratic values and democratic practices, the possibility/impossibility of cosmopolitan democracy as a moral achievement, political ideology vs. religion: Dewey – religion and democracy inside pragmatism, democracy: universalism or specificity - the connection with Enlightenment.

The structure of the volume reflects a refined mixture between practical – political philosophy and the history of ideas. Consequently, the volume opens up with two papers that create a cultural background for the postmodernist jump towards pragmatism and liberalism (by overcoming tradition in a West characterized both by humanism and crisis). Thus, the focus on practical politics (the division following the prologue) makes possible a discussion on classic topics in an updated manner, such as social contract (Dr Naomi Zack's "Social Contract Theory..."), but also very vivid stands on issues directly connected to social and political controversies specific to the global world we live in nowadays (dealing with terrorism, libertarianism, democracy in South-Africa etc).

The second division of the volume – "Democratic theory" represents a fascinating discussion around the popular concept of democracy. Since it's the globally generalized model of political ideal, democracy seems, according to the authors, an ideal that lost its ideality, some of its flaws

being usually overseen. Agreeing with the fact the Dewey is one of the key-theoreticians of the democratic attitude, some of the papers emphasize the fact that its conceptual fundamentals are to be found inside Platonism and Kantianism (Jim Swindler), while others (Gluchman, Cuteanu) go with Rorty and his anti-foundationalist approach, an interpretation quite far from Kantianism, both from a moral and epistemological point of view. Of course, such views “flirt” with a thick touch of relativism, even though dismissed by Rorty. As an example, Michael Hodges’ paper is a very entertaining debate with his colleague at *Vanderbilt* – Robert Tallisse – and around the fact that the doing away with foundationalism would lower democracy to the level of tyranny.

A very interesting discussion is Jon Mahoney’s in his paper “Pragmatism and human Rights”, where he approaches Michael Ignatieff’s arguments from *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry*; Jon Mahoney goes against pragmatism and concludes that human rights need a moral foundation.

The final part of the volume is one that looks at the concept of art in a pragmatist society and bears the refined debate between Professor Krystyna Wilkoszewska and Doctor Peter Hare about art and how it can build a community of experience.

Before ending, we would like to mention the tremendous influence that Peter Hare’s personality had on the success of the conference our university organized last year; Dr Hare generously accepted to be international co-organizer of the conference. As Dr Hare passed away so suddenly last year, it is an honor for us to dedicate this volume to his memory.

It has been a privilege to have, amongst us, somebody who has done so much for philosophy for half a century.

Adrian Gorun, Ph.D.
President of the “Constantin Brancusi”
University from Tg- Jiu, Romania

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly one of the most traumatic discoveries in human intellectual history was the realization that the powers that be were neither natural, necessary, nor preordained. This discovery —seemingly so innocuous to our jaded culture in which rebellion is a fashion of self-expression— germinated in the fecund soil of Europe amply fertilized with the corpses of the wars of religion. The second half of the 17th century was a time much like our own. The peace of Westphalia, an exquisitely war-weary and pragmatic accord, ended nearly a century and a half of bitter religious conflicts, sought to codify the inviolable sovereignty of European kingdoms, and established the carefully guarded European balance of power. Kings would continue to fight their dynastic wars, but these were the desultory affairs of squabbling relatives, not great crusades in defense of the faith. The Holy Church had taught the divine right of kings and Luther had admonished his followers to render unto Caesar, but in the post-ideological world of early-modern Europe, where power and sovereignty was protected not by God but by carefully worded treaties and grand alliances, such notions seemed increasingly quaint.

The philosophical realization born of this epoch: that the state required legitimation, was to produce practical results like no other intellectual revolution in history. New wars of ideology set Europe ablaze. Outside Canada and the Guyanas, the entirety of the Euro-American western hemisphere revolted from its old masters. Yet, in the old world, the Westphalian alliances and reciprocal structures of power held before the onslaught of the Enlightenment, were re-codified in the Congress of Vienna, and enforced bloodily in 1849. This new pragmatic accord was of surprising longevity, but it too broke, unleashing two bitterly ideological World Wars, and an even more ideological Cold War that split the World in two. Of this we inhabit the wake.

Such times may seem uninspiring ones in which to live: it is far more romantic to man the barricades in defense of the Revolution, or a tank in the great crusade against fascism. Nonetheless, such weary times have proven intellectually fecund: the most productive age of Greek philosophy, from Socrates to Aristotle, came after the bloodbath of the Peloponnesian War; as did modern philosophy after the Thirty-Years War, and the scientific revolution after the Napoleonic Wars.

What then of the aftermath Cold War? If there is to be a golden age or intellectual revolution of some sort, it seems obvious that it will not be in philosophy. Or rather, the revolution has already taken place, and the Queen of the Sciences has been deposed. Spared the guillotine but imprisoned within the ivory tower, without a window from which to contemplate the heavens, Lady Philosophy has returned to her old role of comforting the forlorn by rationalizing their failures, and the 20th century has exposed many such failures in need of rationalization. Like Aesop's Fox, her followers have exhausted themselves in reaching for fruits that were beyond their grasp. "Do not despair" she says, always the voice of reason. "They are probably sour anyway." Such is the mandate of pragmatism.

It is the task of an introduction to such a volume to discern and address some common theme resonating within each essay. This insecurity, of the West and its political order, this weariness that is at the same time a restless searching for some standard or modicum of legitimacy —if the grapes are above our grasp, is it still possible to content ourselves with whatever carrion our history has left us?— is, in my opinion, the underlying mood uniting the many variegated perspectives taken by the authors of this volume. As befitting the nature of the questions considered, one must speak in terms of sentiment, for there is most certainly no uniting interpretation; nor should there be, for then we would no longer be thinking in an age of pragmatism, but of ideology.

The editors of the volume have divided it into three parts following a philosophical prologue. For the convenience of the reader, I should like here to summarize each section and the essays therein. My essay on humanism in antiquity and the Renaissance was sufficiently vague and antiquarian to be included in the prologue. More probing and contemporary considerations were taken up by Mihaela Stefanescu who surveys the culture of the West following the fall of Communism, concluding that it is in a state of irrevocable crisis. This crisis is dualistic, split between two opposing antipodes of power: the European Union, which faces an essentialist crisis stemming from its own impotence following WWII and decolonialization, and the United States, which faces an existential crisis stemming from its hegemony of power following the end of the Cold War.

Part One is devoted to essays concerning pragmatism and practical politics in democratic society. Naomi Zack examines the responsibility government has to its citizens during instances of disaster. Following Locke and Hobbes' premise that government is not inevitable and thus must justify itself practically (i.e. not merely ideologically) by improving

the lives of the governed, she rejects the humanitarian approach to disaster response insofar as it is optional, arguing instead that government has a positive obligation to its citizens in times of disaster.

Horst Freyhofer outlines the intellectual history of the libertarian movement in America, asking whether such a philosophy provides a viable alternative to the social-democratic order of the post-war West. He argues that while libertarianism has currently lost its luster and been relegated to a minor third party, its ideals remain, and will reappear and offer legitimate solutions should the crises of the modern state lead to its collapse.

Simon Glynn provides a critical analysis of modern democracy as having become fundamentally corrupted and serving as little more than a rationalization and cover for the reinscription of structures of power. He argues that American democracy no longer represents the interests of its citizens, in fact actively colludes against them, and has thus lost its mandate to govern.

Krystyna Wilkoszewska proposes a connection between Dewey's notion of a "community of experience" and her conception of a "community of art". Such communities are pragmatic insofar as they eschew any fundamental ideology or political dictates, are based not on institutions but organic connections, and value participation and engagement rather than disinterested contemplation.

Linda Simon looks at William James' response to the prosecution of anarchist activists in the wake of the Haymarket Affair, arguing that James' writings on the subject raise serious questions about pragmatist moral reasoning: specifically that concerning the distinction between pragmatism and consequentialism.

Jane Skinner examines the challenges facing the fledgling democracies of South Africa and Eastern Europe and argues for a "pragmatism of marginal political utility" which integrates certain Marxist ideas, specifically the notion of false consciousness, into pragmatist political theory. She concludes that the only way to avoid a democratic "false consciousness", in which citizens unwittingly concede to dogmas of the ruling regime, is through an active education that fosters a "critical consciousness" necessary for a healthy and truly democratic society. Marjorie O'Loughlin writes on Dewey's work on China and explores the relationship between pragmatist philosophy and the development of democratic dispositions and communities. She argues that a Deweyan approach to democracy emphasizes the cultivation of communities of shared values united under democratic dispositions. (Such an approach to democracy stands in contrast to the Enlightenment Western conception of

rational individuals entering a contract under democratic institutions out of self-interest.) Under the Deweyan pragmatist/ communitarian approach, O'Loughlin and Dewey believe that Western democracy can evolve and become compatible with non-Western "traditional" cultures.

Jason Hill deploys Kant's moral theory and defense of cosmopolitanism to argue that permanent residency be understood as a human right in certain situations. Noting Kant's insistence that a republican democracy was the only form of government compatible with human dignity and autonomy insofar as it alone allows for the development of a "moral culture," Hill argues that all human beings, insofar as they are of "innate equality," have a right not to be excluded from this moral culture. From this principle it follows that those who are currently excluded from moral culture *de facto* (in their homeland), should be granted residency in a society of moral culture as a basic human right and in accord with the principle of hospitality. Michel Weber takes up Whitehead's process philosophy as "a defense of liberalism," and examines the fundamentally pragmatic political structures of the Whiteheadian city.

Part Two concerns democratic theory and the legitimacy or non-legitimacy of the democratic state. J.K. Swindler approvingly takes up Dewey's notion of the "democratic attitude," but argues that Dewey's experiential instrumentalist epistemology is insufficient grounds for such a concept. Swindler instead argues that this notion can only fully be accounted on rationalist grounds, particularly Plato's idea of the "common good," and Kant's idea of the "good will". Vasil Gluchman takes up Kant's notion of "humanity", trying both to de-transcendentalize the concept (i.e. not as *homo noumenon*), as well as, through Rorty, seek its expansion. He argues that this concept of humanity is central to human life and moral progress and proposes a new progressive humanism for the 21st century. Susana de Castro examines Rorty theory of justice through a distinction she draws between the classical inheritance of rational justice and a more archaic concept that she calls "philial justice". She argues that Rorty's anti-foundationalism, emphasis on social solidarity, and concept of justice as a "larger loyalty", represent an attempt to syncretize both positions, but without an appeal to a foundational moral principle.

Michael Hodges defends Rorty's anti-foundationalist politics against the criticism of Robert Talisse. He argues that foundational political or moral principles often serve to stifle debate and thus act against democracy, whereas a purely open discourse without claim to any dogma is the purest expression of democracy. Thus Rorty's "deflationary" attacks on metaphysical and epistemological justifications serve not to delegitimize democracy, but rather to clear an open space necessary for its

expression as a practical (rather than an ideological) politics. Cerasel Cuteanu proposes an “ironist approach” to democracy and the question of legitimacy. Such an approach he sees as essential (or perhaps merely the only approach left untarnished by history) if we are to give up predicating our democracies on foundational claims or national narratives. Yet the loss of these structures opens up the possibility of a “tyranny of the majority” which lives at the heart of the democratic project, and to which these very foundationalist notions were originally placed against. Cuteanu concludes that a compromise between Rorty and Habermas is necessary to mediate this threat.

Jon Mahoney rejects this pragmatic/anti-foundationalist conception of morality and politics. Focusing on Michael Ignatieff’s pragmatic defense of human rights, Mahoney argues that such a notion, the *sine qua non* of liberal society, cannot be merely pragmatic if it is to be more than dogma or descriptive claims of what Kant would call “moral anthropology”.

Maria Gluchmanova examines the relevance of Dewey’s philosophy of education to democratic society. She claims that Dewey’s anti-formalist philosophy of education was essentially democratic insofar as it championed the exchange of experience, critical thinking and independent judgment, and the emergent formation (rather than inculcation) of values. Ned McClennen offers a pragmatic theory of justice based on game theory. Noting that we make “pragmatic” decisions (i.e. those in furtherance of things we value) with ease every day, he argues that the amalgamation of these individual decisions and values into a society generates a social form of the economic problem. Given this similarity, he proposes a fundamentally economic perspective to issues of justice and rights based on the pragmatic criterion that such notions must be mutually advantageous to every member of society.

Part Three concludes the volume with a section on art and literature. Peter Hare offers a response to Wilkoszewska’s essay that broadens its scope to examine intellectual culture in general. Hare argues that such communities are exceedingly rare and that ideological fragmentation, specialist balkanization, and institutional hierarchy are the norm. He then looks at the possibility that a pragmatist philosophy or art, by emphasizing its social value, in the end dumbs down art into a form of paternalistic educational entertainment.

There were two questions that lingered in my mind when I reread the essays in this volume while preparing this introduction, and I should like to note them in closing. First, it is to me an open question whether or not a pragmatist ethics is ultimately intelligible, is even ethics at all. If it is, then

it must provide some answer to the problem of the criterion, and this answer must be in some sense foundational, if not in the metaphysical sense then in the discursive sense. The dialogue between the authors in Part Two fundamentally centers on this question. Second, in response to the question I opened with, I shall pose another: has the post-modern state become natural again? If the state is not founded on some fundamental ideology, some declaration of inalienable principles from which it justifies itself, but rather merely on its practical and instrumental ability to provide for the happiness of its citizenry, is there not a danger that we could be bought off by our own democracies? We pay our taxes and complain, but the complaint is more akin to that made of the weather (or of that a medieval serf made against their lord), than that of the tithe or the Stamp Act or the Estates General. When you owe the state thousands of dollars in student loans, are employed by a public university, are provided your water, sewer, and electricity by public utilities, are fed from state subsidized farms...what sort of complaint is one really in the position to make?

Jason Jordan
Ph.D. Candidate, The University of Oregon

PROLOGUE

MODERNITY BETWEEN HUMANISM AND CRISIS; TOWARDS PRAGMATISM AND LIBERALISM BY OVERCOMING TRADITION

ON HUMAN DIGNITY: THE TESTAMENT OF THE TWO HUMANISMS

JASON JORDAN

The concept and pedigree of humanism is the subject of much controversy in the history of ideas. This controversy that is rarely overt, but rather transmitted in unspoken and unexamined assumptions about the status of the human subject and the advent of modernity. An influential (to say the least) reading of the history of philosophy expounded by Strauss and Heidegger maintains that humanism is a peculiar invention of modernity: the intellectual prism through which the light of Being is cast and refracted into its moral, epistemological, and metaphysical spectrum: human rights, subjectivity, and the noumenal/phenomenal dichotomy. Under this interpretation, humanism and its attendants are a singular trope of modernity, utterly foreign to the Greek and medieval mind. An older, perhaps less ideological interpretation, makes the opposite claim: identifying humanism as singular to Greek culture, its fecundity lying at the heart of Hellenic art, literature, and particularly philosophy with its emphasis on rational inquiry. Under this traditional interpretation, the advent of Christianity marked the twilight of Hellenic and Hellenistic rationalism; that the Salvationist otherworldly obsessions emblematic of Christian eschatology stood opposed to very foundations of Greek natural and moral philosophy, inspired a deep misology in western thought, and thus directly or indirectly inaugurated the Dark Ages and the loss of the humanistic tradition of antiquity.

My objective in this paper is challenge both of these interpretations. In doing so I shall argue that there are two different and diametrically opposed strains of humanism. The first strain, which I term ‘naturalist humanism’, was not only endemic to classical antiquity, but indeed was the dominant tradition valorized by the Enlightenment and enacted in Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. In this regard I understand the Enlightenment to be a *classical* rather than *modern* project, its fixations on nationhood and universal rights tracing classical pan-Hellenism and cosmopolitanism, in both cases united under

the vanguard of rationalism. By contrast, philosophical modernity, too often identified with the invention or rediscovery of humanism *as such*, was instead defined by a radicalization of this naturalist humanism thorough the distinctly Christian fixations on epistemological skepticism and theological voluntarism —the traditional weapons of Christian (as well as Judaic and Islamic) anti-humanism against the pretensions of Greek rationalism. Modernity developed from an engagement with these anti-humanist tenants, which ultimately provide the fodder for a far more profound ‘existential humanism’. A commitment that, I believe, stands as the final line of defense for liberalism in the post-modern era.

Humanism has a long and recrudescant history in Western philosophy, ultimately dating back to the 5th century pre-Socratic sophist Antiphon. Antiphon was the author of treatise called *On Truth* —of which only fragments remain— that is often described as a precursor to natural rights theory. The theme of the major extant fragments of *On Truth* is emblematic of Hellenic debates: concerning the dichotomy between *nomos* and *physis*. Antiphon marks himself as a radical by contrasting what he views to be the repressive and arbitrary nature of *nomos* with liberatory and egalitarian nature of *physis*. Like Locke and Rousseau, Antiphon emphasizes the contingency of human law that renders it a plaything of the fickle whims of corruption and power, insisting that: “laws are imposed, whereas nature is necessary.”¹ Antiphon goes on to argue: “the majority of what is just according to law and convention is hostile to nature. For laws have been established over the eyes, as to what they must and must not see...and over the mind, as to what it must and must not desire.”² Antiphon identifies *physis* with human nature and on this basis insists on human equality and cosmopolitanism:

” [the laws of those near by] we know and observe, the laws of those who live far off we neither know nor observe. Now in this we have become barbarians in one another’s eyes; for by birth, at least, we are all naturally adapted in every respect to be either Greeks or barbarians. It is [thus] possible to examine...things by nature necessary for all human beings...”³

This tradition of humanism and cosmopolitanism was taken up in the 4th century by the orator Alcidamas, a pupil of Gorgias. His works have been almost completely lost, but Aristotle records that he wrote a treatise called the “Messeniac Oration” advocating for the liberation of the Messenian

¹ Antiphon, F 44a

² Antiphon, F 44a

³ Antiphon, F 44b, ellipses denote gaps in the text.

helots.⁴ One of the few extant fragments of this work is the shockingly modern claim: “God has sent all men into the world free, and nature has made no man a slave, but slavery goes on.”⁵ The similarity of this quote with Rousseau’s famous opening declaration in *On the Social Contract* is so obvious it scarcely need be pointed out, for both justify the freedom of man on the basis of his natural state, and thus *explicitly* postulate humanism in terms of natural law.⁶ The notion of natural law was common in 5th and 4th century Greek thought; hailed by Empedocles as “an all-embracing law, through the realms of the sky. Unbroken it stretcheth, and over the earth’s immensity.”⁷ Hippias expresses similar sentiments in the *Protagoras* when, attempting to moderate between the bickering Protagoras and Socrates —each of whom are vying to impose their personal style as the required format of the debate— he says: “Gentleman, I regard all of you here present as kinsmen, intimates, and fellow citizen *by nature, not by convention*. For like is akin to like by nature, but convention, *which tyrannizes the human race, often constrains us contrary to nature*.”⁸

As Herschel Baker notes: “this belief in an essentially systematic — and, to the Greek, therefore rational— universe is the touchstone of Greek thought.”⁹ Even Heraclitus, seemingly most at odds with such an ordered cosmology hails: “[the universe] always was, and is, and ever shall be, an ever-living fire, kindling according to fixed measure, and extinguished according to fixed measure.”¹⁰ The difference between radicals such as Antiphon, Euripides, and Alcidas and conservatives such as Plato, Aristotle, and Heraclitus was the status they accorded man within this lawful cosmology. As liberals, the former argue that *de facto* inequality is not inequality *de jure*, while the latter, as conservatives, seek to rationalize *de facto* inequality as *de jure*.¹¹

⁴ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1373b19

⁵ Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 70

⁶ Compare to Rousseau’s declaration: “Every man born in slavery is born for slavery; nothing is more certain. In their chains slaves lose everything, even the desire to escape... If there are slaves by nature, it is because there have been slaves against nature. Force has produced the first slaves; their cowardice has perpetuated them.” (OSC Bk. I, Ch. II)

⁷ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1373b16. Aristotle says that Empedocles used this notion of a natural law to advocate for an extreme universalism and cosmopolitanism which applied to every living creature.

⁸ Plato, *Protagoras*, 337 d

⁹ Baker, *The Dignity of Man*, 18

¹⁰ Heraclitus, F 20

¹¹ Heraclitus, F 43

Describing the Greek belief in natural law and natural inequality governing the human order, Luc Ferry claims, in reference to Strauss, that “human rights are a purely modern invention, bound up with the introduction of subjectivity as a foundation, and we find not the least trace of them in the Greek world.”¹² This is factually untrue—it is hard to understand Alcidas’ rejection of slavery as anything less than a notion of human rights— but insightful. If humanism, subjectivity, and human rights are so intimately related, as I believe they are, then it is unsurprising that we find the earliest defense of human rights precisely among the Greek humanists. It is also unsurprising, in accord with Ferry’s analysis, that such a pre-subjective defense of human rights is, while moving and inspiring, deeply flawed and doomed to failure. The problem with naturalism is that it is fundamentally insufficient as a grounds for humanism. The belief that, as Ferry puts it: “nature is a substantial, hierarchical order that is meaningful in itself and not inert raw material that can receive meaning only from the actions of a human subject,” is inherently inclined towards “a philosophy of nonsubjectivity in which nature is normative (each creature should find its place in the cosmos as a function of its nature and not as a function of a subjective norm of reason), and the social order is no less naturally hierarchical.”¹³ While Euripides may aver that class distinctions are arbitrary,¹⁴ and Antiphon that the norms of nature demand human equality and liberty, this insistence is nowhere evidenced in nature and is seemingly gainsaid by the blatant facts of natural difference. Rousseau criticizes Aristotle’s defense of slavery for “taking the effect for the cause,”¹⁵ yet his conviction of man’s natural freedom hinged an abstract *asseveration* that humanity is fundamentally good and equal *de jure*, in spite of its fallen state *de facto*. Aristotle might have confused cause and effect, but Rousseau’s naturalist humanism is forced to claim that the cause of *every* effect is unnatural: nature is normative but only in the abstract, and always in opposition to *fact*. Nature is not natural, but a philosophical ideal.

The humanist spirit of Antiphon and Alcidas was to be embraced by the great minds of the Renaissance who sought, once again, to understand and describe man as a natural being possessed of natural worth, whose dignity thereby was not wholly reducible to his capacity for salvation.¹⁶

¹² Ferry, *Political Philosophy* Vol. 1, 22

¹³ *Ibid.*, 18

¹⁴ Baker, *The Dignity of Man*, 21

¹⁵ Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, Bk. I, Ch. 2

¹⁶ Kristeller, *Renaissance Concepts of Man*, 5

Yet, in the late-medieval and early-Renaissance humanist tradition, the concept of the “dignity of man” was still vaguely defined and heavily wedded to Aristotelian suppositions concerning teleology and the hierarchy of being; it had not fully come to grips with the aforementioned problem of naturalist humanism. This would change with the rediscovery of Hellenic philosophy following the fall of Constantinople and lead to a radicalization of the humanist project, expounded most prominently by the neo-Platonic Florentine Academy.¹⁷ This radical humanism was to be given its greatest encomium by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, often described as the “manifesto of the Renaissance,” and famously eulogized by Burkhart as “one of the noblest bequests of that great age.”¹⁸

In the *Oration*, Pico’s thought regarding man’s “metaphysical position” is striking divergent from the traditional Renaissance humanist conceptions of man as privileged with a position at the “center” of the universe.¹⁹ Pico goes beyond this neo-Platonic emphasis on the unity of creation, grandly declaring the metaphysical position of man to be existential rather than natural: the font of man’s dignity is grounded on the metaphysical distinction of his existence, rather than the harmonization of his essence: it is by his radical existential freedom rather than his created essence that man measures his worth. This valorization of man on the basis of his *freedom* founds a new vision of humanism fundamentally opposed to the naturalism of the Greek humanists, one that seeks to define the dignity of man not as granted by nature, but arising in opposition to nature.

After briefly surveying the historical canon concerning the relation between man and universe, Pico expresses his dissatisfaction with the tradition as it invariably seeks to *unite* the two under conditions of similarity, rendering man into either an artifact or a microcosm —a “mixtum compositum” of the world.²⁰ Pico has higher aspirations for humanity and seeks to define man’s metaphysical privilege in terms of his *difference* and separation from the world, *both natural and spiritual*.²¹ In a passage from the *Oration* that has become famous, Pico imagines the demiurge describing to Adam his special dignity thus:

¹⁷ Kristeller, *Renaissance Concepts of Man*, 70, 92

¹⁸ Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 21

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27

²⁰ Cassirer, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 320

²¹ *Ibid.*, 320

"We have given you, Adam, no definite place, no form proper only to you, no special inheritance, so that you may have as your own whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may choose, according to your wish and your judgment. All other beings have received a rigidly determined nature, and will be compelled by us to follow strictly determined laws. You alone are bound by no limit, unless it be one prescribed by your will, which I have given you"²²

One of the most startling features of this beautiful passage is the proto-existentialism it assigns to man's metaphysical position: his essence which *opposes* any determination. As Ernst Cassirer notes in his groundbreaking analysis of Renaissance humanism, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*:

„The dignity of man cannot reside in his being, i.e., in the place allotted to man once and for all in the cosmic order. The hierarchical system subdivides the world into different levels and places each being in one of these levels as its rightful place in the universe. But such a view does not grasp the meaning and problem of human freedom"²³

Pico's conviction thus rests on a fundamental opposition between *nature*, as the essence of natural beings (qua artifacts), and *freedom*, as the essence of Pico's anti-natural man. The identity of artifacts depends on their stability, the identity of essences depends on their immutability, the self-identity of man depends on and demands the exact opposite: that he be undefined and always in flux, that his essence be purely the product of his own free choice and always subject to revision. Eugenio Garin describes Pico's understanding of the human condition thus:

[Pico] argued that every existing reality has its own *nature* by which its behavior is determined. Thus the dog will always behave like a dog; and a lion, like a lion. Man alone has no nature which determines him and has no essence to determine his behavior. Man creates himself by his own deeds and thus he is father of himself. The only condition he is subject to is the condition that there is no condition".²⁴

The Sartrean notion here of man being subject only to the compulsion of his freedom is startling. While other thinkers had struggled to reconcile

²² Pico, qtd. in Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, 85

²³ Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, 84

²⁴ Garin, *Italian Humanism*, 105

the man's freedom with his natural condition and with his essential quiddity, Pico subordinates the latter to the former: "Man, therefore, is not a *quid*, but a cause and a free act," that is "a genuine *quis*."²⁵

This view of humanity centers on a radical interpretation of Genesis 1:26, in which God is said to have created man in His own image. As Cassirer points out:

"Creation in the ordinary sense can only be understood as the conferring upon the created both a definite, limited being and, at the same time, a definite, prescribed sphere of willing and of acting. But man breaks through every such barrier. His activity is not dictated to him by his reality; rather, man's activity contains ever new possibilities which, by their very nature, go beyond any finite circle."²⁶

God is a creator, and while "man is a creature...what distinguishes him above all other creatures is that his maker gave him the gift of creation."²⁷

This "gift" fundamentally divorces man from Nature, placing him outside the natural hierarchy of determined beings. Through his freedom and his powers of creation, the dignity of man is ontologically distinct from his mere being, and thus he represents an anti-natural creature *par excellence*, one that has no place within the traditional Aristotelian taxonomy of the natural order. As Pico's demiurge describes to Adam his possibilities:

"I created you as a being neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, so that you may freely make and master yourself, and take on any form you choose for yourself. You can degenerate to animality or be reborn towards divinity."²⁸

The essence of man is, like God, indistinguishable from his existence since, as pure possibility, as *pure freedom*, it lacks any determination or definition, that is, any type, and is thus not an essence at all. The sweeping nature and extent of human freedom, as Cassirer insists, "remains a basic intellectual phenomenon by virtue of which we are not only related to Him but actually one with Him. For human *freedom* is of such a kind that any

²⁵ Ibid., 105

²⁶ Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, 88

²⁷ Ibid., 95

²⁸ Pico, qtd. in Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, 85

increase in its meaning or value is impossible...²⁹ Pico's reasoning here is radical and deeply heretical, for it denies that man is a mere (and debased) image of God, but is actually united with God, *in this life and in the most profound and fundamental way possible*—mankind resides alongside the divine in the *metakosmia*. This is an extreme enthusiasm as it means that man is barely distinguishable from God. As Luther was to warn: “free-will is obviously a term applicable only to the Divine Majesty; for only He can do, and does whatever he wills in heaven and on earth. If free will is ascribed to men, it is ascribed with no more propriety than divinity itself would be—and no blasphemy could exceed that!”³⁰

In the Christian tradition it is Pelagianism that comes closest to a full existential humanism, and to the extent that contemporary Catholicism is a humanism, it is precisely because it has recoiled from Augustinian dogmas and embraced the tepid heresy of Semi-Pelagianism. Unsurprisingly, Pico has often been described as a Pelagian for espousing a similar optimism concerning man's innate moral potential. Nowhere in the oration does Pico mention the Fall, leading Cassirer to hail: “...the frankness and boldness with which Pico reaffirms the basic Pelagian thesis. For him man's sinfulness does not stand as an indelible stain upon his nature; for in it he sees nothing but the correlate and counterpart of something other and higher. Man must be capable of sin, that he may become capable of good.”³¹ If man is as Pico describes him: a fundamentally undefined,

²⁹ Cassirer, “Giovanni Pico della Mirandola”, 336. This divinization of man's will is strikingly compatible with Descartes claim in the *Meditations* that:

“My will or freedom of choice is the only thing I find to be so great in me that I can't conceive of anything greater. In fact, it's largely for this reason that I regard myself as an image or likeness of God. God's will is incomparably greater than mine, of course, in virtue of the associated knowledge and power, which make it stronger and more effective, and also in virtue of its greater range of objects. *Yet, viewed in itself as a will, God's will seems no greater than mine.*” (*Meditations* 30, emphasis added)

Or, as Cassirer describes Pico's understanding of the extent of man's creative power, i.e. his will: “In the *extent* of his creation he remains infinitely removed from God; but in the fact, in the *quality* of his creation he feels himself at the same time most intimately related to God.” (*Ibid.*, 336)

³⁰ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 188

³¹ Cassirer, “Giovanni Pico della Mirandola”, 329. It should be noted that the demiurge's speech to Adam supposedly occurred before the Fall, yet, one might assume that if this were an important theological point for Pico, he would have mentioned it as such, which he did not. It should also be noted that Pico retreated from this extremely heretical position towards the end of his short life; after his

incomplete, and *free* being, then he cannot possibly be *subject to* the indelible and insuperable stain of original sin —*as a stain on his nature*. As Pelagius himself argues in his beautiful and stunningly humanistic “Letter to Demetrias”:

”First, then, you ought to measure the good of human nature by reference to its creator, I mean God...[who] before actually making man, determines to fashion him in his own image and likeness and shows what kind of creature he intends to make him...[in doing so] he makes it abundantly clear how much more gloriously man himself has been fashioned and wants him to appreciate the dignity of his own nature...Moreover, the Lord of Justice wished man to be free to act and not under compulsion...God wished to bestow on the rational creature the gift of doing good of his own free will and the capacity to exercise free choice, [so it was] *by* implanting in man the possibility of choosing either alternative, that He made it his peculiar right to be what he wanted to be...”³²

This great *conviction* —that human dignity was fundamentally moral and thus fundamentally bound to freedom— was to be completed by Kant fourteen centuries later. As he argues in the *Groundwork*: “morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself...Hence morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity...*Autonomy* is therefore the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational creature.”³³ Like Kant, Pelagius describes that if man is to truly be in the image of his God, if human dignity is to survive the Fall, then grace cannot be an unconditional and undeserved gift bestowed upon the wretch; nor, *pace* Antiphon and Rousseau, can it be natural and inherent to man’s nature, for as he notes in his treatise *On Nature*: “Whatever is fettered by natural necessity is deprived of the determination of will and deliberation.”³⁴ Rather, grace must be understood as an existential *capacity* coextensive with human freedom, as an “inborn faculty,”³⁵ as the undeniable “peculiar right” of man by which he is able “to be what he want[s] to be.”³⁶ This freedom to

work was the subject of a Papal condemnation and he had fallen under the influence of Sarvanola. (Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 83)

³² Pelagius, *Letter to Demetrias*, 2.1-3.2, emphasis added.

³³ G 4:435-6

³⁴ Pelagius, *On Nature*, §49

³⁵ Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 79

³⁶ Just as man cannot be deprived of his capacity for good, so to he cannot face eternal punishment on account of his capacity for evil. Thus, Pico explicitly

choose good or evil is the freedom of an *incomplete* being, a being open to possibility rather than a helpless wretch condemned to suffer the damnation of his own debasement. If the dignity of man is truly to never be a completed being, for good or evil, *then the ends of man must be indeterminate as well.*

With Pelagius' and Pico's existentialist humanism, the link between God and man is strong and fecund: *man is not so much the image of God as God is the image of man.* This elevation clashes violently with the misanthropy that has dominated Christian thought historically, for with Augustine's voluntarist anti-humanism the bond between man and God was severed forever with the Fall, and along with it the last modicum of man's natural worth. Inasmuch as modernity inaugurated by Descartes embraces a theological voluntarism (against Greek rationalism and under which God is an inscrutable absolute) that isolates the human from the divine and established man as a *subiectum*, it is compatible with the anti-humanism of Augustine. Yet the brilliance of modernity, as is evident in Pico soaring vision of man's existential condition, and in Descartes vow to make humanity the "lords and masters of nature," is that it assumes and engages this canonical understanding of 'man the wretch prostrate beneath his absolute God', yet through a masterful intellectual maneuver, founds upon this anthropic abyss a far more radical and sweeping defense of human dignity. If, as I believe, Greek paganism and Christianity originally constructed its God(s) with a human face and in the image of man, as the testament of Pelagius makes all too (almost sorrowfully) clear, then it is precisely in Cartesian philosophy pushing God away —just as Pico had pushed Nature away— that a space for the human is opened, by which humanity might measure that which is uniquely its own, by which it might measure its natural worth, thereby reclaiming that image it had given to the divine for itself.

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embraces the apocatastatic teachings of Origen against an eternal and inescapable Hell. (see Cassirer, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola", 330)

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