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Introduction

This book explores a number of anthropological dimensions that contemporary sociology and philosophy have used to define notions of ‘the human’, ‘human being’, ‘humanity’ and ‘human nature’. Rather than declaring the death of the human, or that it incarnates everything that is wrong with ‘the West’, I contend that we need to look closely at a variety of ways in which these conceptions have been more or less explicitly articulated in the work of a number of leading theorists of the past sixty or so years. I call this project *philosophical sociology* and organise it around three main pillars:

1. The anthropological features that define us as human beings are to a large extent independent from, but cannot be realised in full outside, social life. The core of this book then looks at seven of these properties as they have been discussed by a particular writer: *self-transcendence* (Hannah Arendt), *adaptation* (Talcott Parsons), *responsibility* (Hans Jonas), *language* (Jürgen Habermas), *strong evaluations* (Charles Taylor), *reflexivity* (Margaret Archer) and *the reproduction of life* (Luc Boltanski).
2. Given that in contemporary societies humans themselves are ultimate arbiters of what is right and wrong, our shared anthropological features as members of the human species remain the best option to justify normative arguments. These anthropological traits define us as members of the same species and are the basis from which ideas of justice, self, dignity and the good life emerge. *A universalistic principle of humanity* is to be preferred over particularistic conceptions of race, culture, identity and indeed class.
3. Normative ideas are therefore irreducible to the material or socio-cultural positions that humans occupy in society; they depend on the human capacity to reflect on what makes us human; our conceptions of the human underpin our normative notions in social life because they allow us to imagine the kind of beings that we would like to become. This book offers neither a complete nor a unified catalogue of anthropological capacities that can be construed as ‘human nature’.

It focuses instead on those anthropological features that are central to our understanding of the normative aspects of social life.

Sociology and Philosophy

The notion of *philosophical sociology* indicates also a preference for a conception of sociology that cannot be realised without a close and careful relationship with philosophy. While the early institutionalisation of sociology was unquestionably driven by an effort of differentiation from philosophy (Manent 1998), it is wrong to construe this as sociology's rejection or neglect of philosophy (Adorno 2000). We can instead observe at least three main ways in which these connections are being constantly redrawn.

A first 'positivist' path understands the philosophical tradition as sociology's *pre-scientific heritage*, whereas its future belongs to empirical and scientific work. Within the classical canon of sociology, this attitude is arguably best represented by Durkheim (1982) as he engaged extensively in philosophical speculation but sought always to keep both domains distinctly apart. Durkheim remained interested in philosophy and wrote more than occasional works that are indeed philosophical, but he never betrayed his fundamental intuition that he was to contribute to sociology as a specialist subject that was defined by its own theories, methodological rules and internal thematic differentiation (Durkheim 1960, 1970). The key feature of this way of looking at their interconnections is that, however much can be gained from *philosophical* enquiry, this does not constitute a sociological task *sensu stricto* (Luhmann 1994, Merton 1964).

A second trajectory is constituted by explicit attempts at *epistemological self-clarification*. An argument that we can trace back to Weber's (1949) extensive methodological disquisitions, the focus here is on elucidating the logic of sociology's scientific arguments. All such debates as idealism vs materialism, individualism vs collectivism, or realism vs constructivism belong in this category, and we may equally include here a wide range of histories of sociology that have been written in order to illuminate the wider pool of *cognitive* commitments that inform the sociological imagination (Benton 1977, Levine 1995, Ritzer 1988). Rather than being excluded from sociology, philosophy takes here the well-known role of under-labourer: philosophical tools may be included into the sociologist's kit, but a neat separation between epistemological discussions and substantive empirical work ought to remain in place.

The third approach to the relationships between sociology and philosophy uses the philosophical tradition as a source from which to draw

various *normative motifs* (Ginsberg 1968, Hughes 1974). Classically, Marx's (1973) critique of political economy shows the extent to which the fundamentally philosophical motif of critique was to guide his engagement with the 'scientific' procedures or empirical concerns of political economy. Also close to an idea of 'social philosophy', critical social theory is arguably paradigmatic of this kind of engagement in terms of the reconfiguration of normative questions as philosophy's key contribution to scientific sociology (Habermas 1974, Marcuse 1973). Yet this kind of engagement is equally available in 'nostalgic' or even 'conservative' positions within the history of sociology (MacIntyre 2007, Nisbet 1967).

These three approaches to the relationships between philosophy and sociology may not exhaust all possible options but do capture the most salient ones. Neither disciplinary arrogance nor parochialism will do here though: a re-engagement between sociology and philosophy must take the form of a mutual learning process between the different knowledge-claims that underpin them both: the empirical vocation of sociology as it grapples with the complexities of contemporary society and the kind of unanswerable questions that we still associate with the best of the philosophical tradition. At stake is the fact that as long as sociology continues to raise the big questions about life in society – the relative influence of material and ideal factors in historical explanations, the relationships between individual actions and social trends, the interconnections between nature and culture or the dialectics between domination and emancipation – these are all questions that also transcend it: *good sociological questions are always, in the last instance, also philosophical ones.*

Philosophical Anthropology

The idea of philosophical *sociology* achieved some modest visibility in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century. As Georg Simmel (1950) and Ferdinand Tönnies (2005) defined it, philosophical sociology was a form of epistemological self-clarification whose purpose was to contribute to the scientific establishment of sociology. But in the context of a discipline that was still intellectually and institutionally in the making, philosophical sociology was always unlikely to find wide support. Short-lived as it actually was, the project of a philosophical sociology was already building on previous work on *philosophical anthropology*.¹

¹ There is no comprehensive account of philosophical anthropology available in English, but see the special section on philosophical anthropology in the inaugural issue of *Iris* (in particular, Borsari 2009, Fischer 2009, Gebauer and Wulf 2009 and Rehberg 2009). My brief account below is informed by Cassirer (1996, 2000) and Schnädelbach (1984).

An incipient intellectual project, philosophical anthropology looked for a comprehensive answer to the question of what is a human being. Its foundational cohort is primarily associated with the work of Max Scheler and to a lesser extent with that of Ernst Cassirer, both of whom shared a diagnostic with regard to the need for a new discipline that could *bring together* what we know about what makes us human beings. Writing in 1927, Scheler (2009: 5) opens his *The Human Place in the Cosmos* with a claim that we have since heard many times: ‘in no historical era has the human being become so much of a problem to himself that as in ours’. From medicine to philology, the original project of philosophical anthropology was an attempt to *reunite* scientific and philosophical knowledge about what is a human being. Crucially, this argument for reunification was made not only in an epistemological key but also in an ontological one: a dual approach to human beings results from, and must be preserved, because of the duality of the human condition itself: humans are partly natural bodies that are controlled by their urges, emotions and physico-chemical adaptation to the world *and* partly conscious beings that are defined by their intellectual, aesthetic and indeed moral insights.

The rise of philosophical anthropology led also to a fuller realisation that the question ‘what is a human being’ does not trouble professional intellectuals alone. It rather emerges out of human experiences of and in the world; it is the kind of ‘existential’ question that is a perennial concern for human beings themselves. As part of the human condition, it is central to religious, mythical and indeed scientific world-views and is to be found across history and through different cultures: *a human is a being who asks what is a human being; humans are beings who ask anthropological questions* (Blumenberg 2011: 341, 375). At its best, this early programme of philosophical anthropology leads to a universalistic principle of humanity that is built on the following four commitments:

1. Life expresses itself through an upward gradient in complexity that goes from *plants*, that have little option but to passively adapt to the environment, to *animals* that make use of their instincts, to *humans* who can *reflexively decide* who they are and what they want to do with their existence.
2. Average members of the human species are *all* similarly endowed with general anthropological capacities that make a key contribution to life in society. Human beings recognise one another as members of the same species because of these shared anthropological endowments.²

² In contemporary philosophy, the so-called Capabilities Approach may be taken as one tradition that builds on previous insights from philosophical anthropology (Nussbaum 1992, 2006, Sen 1999). Interestingly, this is now finding a voice also within sociological debates (Gangas 2014, 2016).

3. The human body has an ambivalent position for humans themselves: it is an object in the natural world, it is the 'container' of our anthropological features *and* it is also a cultural artefact.
4. Given that human nature is ultimately indeterminate vis-à-vis social and cultural relations, humans do turn themselves into an explicit concern.

For my purposes in this book, by far the most consequential intervention in this early delimitation of philosophical sociology and philosophical anthropology comes from Karl Löwith's 1932 book *Max Weber and Karl Marx*. Arguably best known for his discussion of secularisation (Löwith 1964) and his perceptive criticisms of Heidegger (Löwith 1995), the main contention of this little book is that the importance of both Weber and Marx lies in that they successfully brought together the two intellectual genres in which we are interested: the venerable concerns of philosophy with the idea of 'man' and the fresh start that was offered by the interest of the social sciences in 'capitalism'. The latter was of course the explicit focus of Weber and Marx: they were *equally* trying to understand capitalism and offered radically *different* accounts of its emergence and functioning. But there is also a philosophical layer to their writings that, in Löwith's interpretation, is in fact more significant. There, he contends, their apparent differences are sublated into a fundamental common ground: the core 'of their investigations is one and the same ... what is it that makes man "human" within the capitalistic world' (Löwith 1993: 42–3). This anthropological enquiry into what is a human being was surely not the explicit goal of either writer, but therein lies nonetheless 'their original motive' (1993: 43). Weber and Marx offered a new kind of intellectual enquiry that was, simultaneously, empirically informed and normatively oriented, and this was precisely what made them 'philosophical sociologists' (Löwith 1993: 48). It is through the combination of scientific and philosophical approaches that they addressed fundamental intellectual questions: the interplay of material and ideal factors in human life, the immanent and transcendental condition of historical time, the relationships between social action and human fate, the disjuncture between existential concerns we all share as human beings and our particular socio-historical contexts. In Löwith's reconstruction, therefore, Marx's idea of humanity is fundamentally informed by his understanding of alienation – a world that must be wholly transformed because it impedes human development – while Weber is concerned with the inevitable flattening of our human concerns in a modern world that allows only for specialism, bureaucratisation and disenchantment.

Deeply rooted in its own intellectual traditions, this first generation of philosophical anthropology did not fully realise the extent to which natural

scientists had already stopped asking for philosophy's permission when it came to asking questions about the human condition: the biological sciences rather than philosophy were making knowledge about the human to advance at an unprecedented rate (von Uexküll 2010). On the one hand, if science was setting the new standards, then the *philosophical* drive of philosophical anthropology looked somewhat inadequate: as a project that needed to confront the challenges of the contemporary *scientific* civilisation, philosophical anthropology, looked old before it really got going.³ On the other hand, philosophical anthropology was looked at with scepticism even within professional philosophy itself. To Edmund Husserl (1931), who at the time was *the* leading German philosopher, philosophical anthropology seemed second-rate philosophy because the psychological and physiological limitations of the human mind were never going to live up to the standards of the general questions about mind, consciousness and reason *in general*.⁴ A *mere* interest in the human, the more so as it now had to include the 'lower' biological functions of human life, was never going to replace philosophy's enduring concerns.

If we now include also the turbulent historical period within which philosophical anthropology emerged, there was perhaps something inevitable in its rapid demise as a field of study. In a context of volatile nationalistic passions, growing state institutions, urbanisation and industrialism, militarisation and colonial wars, hyperinflation and the rise of mass political parties, a concern with the human in general, let alone a belief in a unified theory of the human under the tutelage of philosophy, could be seen as dramatically out of touch. Whole populations or collectives were being pushed outside the human family (if they were ever permitted to sit at this high table in the first place), political democracy was scoffed by traditional elites *and* dismissed as mere bourgeois ideology by revolutionaries, and the individual was being sacrificed on behalf of the nation, the party, the revolution and indeed humanity itself. In a world that seemed dominated by power struggles, capitalism, technological innovations and particularistic ideas of nation and race, the venerable Kantian idea that humans be treated as ends and never as means rang idealistic at best.⁵

³ This is, in effect, Jürgen Habermas's (1992a) argument on the relationship between science and philosophy in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*. See also Chernilo (2013b).

⁴ To that extent, Heidegger's equally ambivalent relationship to philosophical anthropology echoes Husserl's doubts, though in his case the general scepticism is based on an irrationalist and elitist understanding of *being*. See Chapter 1.

⁵ Or, differently put, the 'revival' of German philosophical anthropology in the early part of the twentieth century can be seen as a reaction to the success of philosophies of history in public discourse as apparent, for instance, in Oswald Spengler's hugely popular *Decline of the West*, whose first volume was originally published in 1918.

The massacres and crimes of World War II did not make things easier for philosophical anthropology and yet it was in its aftermath where it arguably experienced the peak of its influence and public exposure. Closely associated with the works of Arnold Gehlen (1980, 1988) and Helmut Schelsky (1967) – both of whom were Nazi sympathisers – a second generation of philosophical anthropology gave up on the original humanistic concerns of Cassirer and Scheler and instead helped articulate such conventional conservative concerns as the dangers of technology and the erosion of community.⁶ The humanist sensibility was not altogether abandoned, however, as apparent in Helmuth Plessner's (1970) influential work *Laughing and Crying*, who once again tried to reunite the organic and intellectual dimensions of human life.⁷ Finally, towards the last part of the twentieth century, a third generation of philosophical anthropology has emerged. Here, the ontological convictions that defined the first generation were now being given up: Odo Marquard's (1989) *homo compensator* and Hans Blumenberg's (2011) reflections on the powers of human *delegation*, both point to a description of our generic anthropological potentials. Yet their anti-foundationalist definition of the human can hardly be reconciled with previous notions of human nature.

Homo Sociologicus

Given that this book looks at the relationships between philosophy and sociology, let me now look more closely at some instantiations of these general reflections about the human within mainstream sociology. Ralf Dahrendorf, who among other accolades was director of the London School of Economics between 1974 and 1984, wrote two early pieces that deal directly with the questions that concern us here: *Homo Sociologicus*, in 1957, and a follow-up essay *Sociology and Human Nature*, in 1962. Dahrendorf uses the term philosophical sociology only in passing and in order to emphasise the *inability* of European sociology to differentiate between philosophical/normative concerns, on the one hand, and strictly empirical/scientific ones, on the other (1973: 78). As sociology's maturity depends on a strict separation between these two domains, Dahrendorf praises American social science for having made the idea of the 'social role' central to this demarcation. *Homo sociologicus* is thus introduced as the disciplinary equivalent of *homo oeconomicus* in modern

⁶ See, for instance, Axel Honneth's (2009) critique.

⁷ Plessner was Jewish and had been subject to persecution by the Nazis, so his reinstatement in German academia also contributed to the intellectual rehabilitation of philosophical anthropology. On Plessner, see Heinze (2009) and the more recent collection that was put together by Jos de Mul (2014).

economics and ‘psychological man’ in twentieth-century scientific psychology: where the former is interested in the calculation of possibilities for personal gain, the latter’s behaviour is always underpinned by unconscious motifs that can never become fully clear to the individual herself. On the basis of the *scientific* success of modern economics and psychology, it was now sociology’s turn to clearly delimit the *one aspect of human behaviour that constitutes sociology’s genuine subject matter*: ‘[t]o a sociologist the individual *is* his social roles’ (Dahrendorf 1973: 7).

The scientific constructions of *Homo oeconomicus*, *homo psychologicus* and *homo sociologicus* share two important features. First, they all seek to capture that particular point at which the individual and society intersect: individual preferences/objective conditions for *homo oeconomicus*, unconscious drives/social norms for *homo psychologicus*, personal capabilities/social performance for *homo sociologicus*. Second, none offers a comprehensive theory of human nature but is instead construed as a unilateral exaggeration of one particular anthropological feature that has proved particularly useful from one, equally particular, disciplinary point of view. In defining *homo sociologicus* as stable and predictable role-conforming behaviour, sociology ‘*explicitly renounces a sociological image of man*: it proclaims the intention of finding powerful explanatory theories of social action rather than describing the nature of man accurately and realistically’ (Dahrendorf 1973: 76, my italics).⁸

From a scientific standpoint, Dahrendorf contends, this is a win-win situation because the net increment in the predictive capability of sociology leads also to a realisation of the futility of metaphysical speculation. But given that social scientific concepts belong also in public and political discourse, the wider philosophical underpinnings of *homo sociologicus* react back on society’s self-understanding. Dahrendorf (1973: 59) then argues that ‘[s]ociology has paid for the exactness of its propositions with the humanity of its intentions, and has become a *thoroughly inhuman, amoral science*’. He elaborates as follows on this challenge:

If the assumption of role conformity has proved extraordinarily fruitful in *scientific* terms, in *moral* terms the assumption of a *permanent protest against the demands of society is much more fruitful*. This is why an image of man may be developed that stresses man’s *inexhaustible capacity for overcoming* all the forces for alienation that are inherent in the conception and reality of society. (Dahrendorf 1973: 84, my italics)

⁸ A general overview of the problems associated with thinking about the relationships between ideas of the human and ideas of social can be found in Hollis (1977: 1–21). For an exploration of ideas of human nature in classical sociology, see Honneth and Joas (1988).

One implication of this discussion is that, to the extent that we engage both with ideas of the human and conceptions of the social, we can *never* fully separate out descriptive and normative concerns. They must be distinguished analytically, and we ought to be able to discuss them separately, but we need also explore their interrelations. And it also shows that, to the extent that we base our reflections on the human on reductionist anthropological accounts, these find expression in, and have dramatic consequences for, our conceptions of the social. The problem does not lie in any specific shortcoming of *homo oeconomicus*, *homo psychologicus* or *homo sociologicus* but in the fact that, as they are by definition unilateral reductions of our human capacities, the alleged success of their *scientific* contribution cancels itself out in terms of the *normative* shortcomings it also obtains. The study of social life requires instead a universalistic principle of humanity that offers a richer account of our defining anthropological features. Indeed, Dahrendorf's passing comment on the 'inexhaustible capacity for overcoming' the forces of conformity and alienation speaks directly about the human abilities of self-transcendence and reflexivity.⁹

Sadly, however, mainstream contemporary sociology does not seem to have learned the right lessons on this issue. Committed as he is to political causes, Pierre Bourdieu engages constantly with normative questions. But Bourdieu does not conceptualise normativity *sociologically*; normative *ideas* are not included as an actual dimension of the social world because conflict and power struggles are deemed enough for a fully formed ontology of the social: '[t]he particularity of sociology is that it takes as its object fields of struggle – not the field of class struggle but the field of scientific struggles itself. And the sociologist occupies a position in these struggles' (Bourdieu 1994: 10). The normative motif of his militant sociology is that the interests of less powerful actors ought to be favoured against those of more powerful ones, so the role of the sociologist is to help subordinate actors get their interest advanced wherever and whenever this is needed.¹⁰ My difficulty is not at all with Bourdieu's political options but with the shallow anthropology that underpins it: sociology 'inevitably appeals to anthropological theories . . . it can make real progress only *on condition that it makes explicit these theories that researchers always bring in . . .* and which

⁹ Dahrendorf's critique is directed primarily against Parsons. See [Chapter 3](#).

¹⁰ I focus on Bourdieu given his mainstream status in contemporary sociology: by September 2016, Pierre Bourdieu carried more citations in Google Scholar than Weber and Marx *combined*. But the general argument applies also, for instance, to Niklas Luhmann even if for opposite reasons. According to Luhmann (1994), it is sociology's *excessive* normativism that is responsible for the discipline's chronic under-achievements. The result is, however, comparable to Bourdieu's: normative questions are of no particular relevance to sociology because there is no autonomous normative domain in society itself. See Chernilo (2012d).

are generally no more than the transfigured projection of their relation to the social world' (Bourdieu 1994: 19, my italics).

Knowingly or otherwise, Bourdieu follows Dahrendorf here: we ought to take our anthropological presuppositions seriously and make them explicit because they are a *transfigured projection* of our own conceptions of the social world. If we assess how Bourdieu's own arguments fare on these questions, we see that a reductionist notion of self-interests at the anthropological level is then coupled by an equally reductionist conception of the social as a space of constant struggle:

There is a form of interest or function that lies behind every institution or practice . . . the specifically social magic of an institution can constitute almost anything as an interest and as a realistic interest, i.e. as an *investment* (both in the economic and the psychoanalytic senses), that is objectively rewarded, in the more or less long term, by an *economy*. (Bourdieu 1994: 18)

Because *interests lie behind every institution and practice*, Bourdieu's sociology predicts a world of winners and losers and anticipates on which side our normative loyalties should be. We may then account for the structural features of various social contexts, but remain unable to grasp what is normatively at stake because irreducible normative ideas are not part of this version of *homo sociologicus*. In fact, the irrationalist conception of human nature offered by Bourdieu mirrors those offered by equally one-sided, arguments on, say, primordial authenticity (Connell 2007). This 'normative-less' depiction of social life has become sociology's very own self-fulfilling dystopia: we do not take normative factors into account as part of what we have to explain sociologically because our ontologies of the social allow for no concept of the normative.¹¹

A Post-Human World?

The references I have briefly discussed up to now remain relatively conventional not only in terms of their disciplinary reference point *within* sociology but also in the sense that they all speak directly about a kind of being that is more or less explicitly and confidently described as 'human'. But whether this is in fact an adequate claim is precisely the question that seems most pressing nowadays. Under the general banner of posthumanism, we find artificial intelligence and cognitive science experts who discuss the uniqueness of the biological makeup of the human species, science and technology experts who redraw the contours of the human through its interactions with various other domains of reality, global

¹¹ Reinhard Bendix (1970: 3–61) had already warned about the problems of a dual irrationalism in our preconceptions of the human and our theories of the social.

warming and animal rights activists who challenge the destructive and indeed self-destructive features of modern anthropocentrism, and post-colonial and gender scholars who highlight the whole range of violent exclusions that have been justified by anything but benevolent Western ideas of humanity. These positions come from different angles and have their own targets of critique, but they *can* be grouped together if we consider that they are all interested in the wrong presuppositions and negative implications of modern anthropocentrism and, by implication, humanism.¹²

I have of course written this book within this intellectual climate but below will not be engaging with these arguments systematically. Ideas of humanity are of course socially construed, change historically and are full of highly problematic assumptions at cognitive, theological and normative levels (Foucault 1997). But nowadays it takes too little effort to challenge so-called 'traditional' ideas of the human and then make the additional claim that *they* are ultimately to blame for all of modernity's sins. I reject these claims and suggest that we use them as an invitation to step back and interrogate again the status of our conceptions of the human. But in order to do this, we cannot *start* with spurious claims to novelty – and not only because there is nothing *less* original than claims to originality. This fallacy of presentism misses the key insight that the very quest about what makes us human is paradigmatic of the all too human frustration with the irritating inevitability of the question of what it means to be human. When posthumanists reject the foundationalism that underpins traditional 'humanist' ideas, all their key motifs (growing knowledge of human biology, the challenges and opportunities of technology, the aporias of anthropocentrism) are precisely those that, under different names, had been raised for well over 200 years. It is impossible for me to survey the various bodies of literature that have touched on these issues over the past few decades. For the purposes of this introduction, I would simply like to illustrate further my argument by discussing, in paradigmatic fashion, recent interventions in three different fields.

Bruno Latour's work is well known for having made claims about the *definitive* need for a whole new ontology that, as it offers a radical re-description of concepts of the social, culture and nature, seeks also to do without the distinction between humans and nonhumans (Latour 1993).

¹² Badmington's (2000) collection is illustrative because, under the loose banner of post-humanism, it brings together Fanon's critique of Western imperialism, Donna Haraway's work on cyborgs, Roland Barthes's semiological analysis and Althusser's virulent anti-humanism. See Kieran Durkin's (2014: 129–43) excellent discussion of early incarnations of anti-humanism from a standpoint that is compatible with the arguments that I am offering here.

In his recent *An Enquiry into the Modes of Existence*, for instance, Latour specifies further the idea of ‘networks’ that is one of his major conceptual contributions. He speaks now of ‘series of associations’, ‘series of instauration’ and ‘chains of references’ which, as they are a form of *becoming*, allow him to contend that stability resides in change, solidity in flexibility, necessity in contingency, universality in particularity, etc. (Latour 2013: 33, 154–62). He also touches on sociology’s conventional depiction of law, politics, the economy, etc. as differentiated systems, fields or value spheres and, again, turns conventional disciplinary wisdom upside down. Rather than concentrating on the autonomy of each of these domains, it is their heteronomy that we ought to be interested in: non-legal elements create law, non-political ones create politics, non-economic ones create the economy (Latour 2013: 29–35, 130–49).

As methodological or indeed conceptual propositions, these claims are all suggestive and, to Latour’s credit, they have proved valuable in several empirical domains; most notably science and technology studies. Methodologically, humans are not *only* agents and technologies are never *fully* passive; conceptually, our modern conceptions of nature, society and culture are *always* in need of redefinition. But these claims neither require nor justify the ontological dissolution of the human. Offered as a new ontology, the stakes are indeed higher and Latour’s arguments appear far more problematic. A first question has then to do with whether ‘nature’, ‘society’ and ‘culture’ actually exist but they have been badly misunderstood by the moderns – they are hybrids rather than self-contained domains – or whether they do not exist at all and the real constituents are in fact hybrids themselves. See, for instance:

even though we construct Society through and through, it lasts, it surpasses us, it dominates us, it has its own laws, it is as transcendent as Nature . . . The critical power of the modern lies in this double language: they can mobilize nature at the heart of social relationships, even as they leave Nature infinitely remote from human beings; they are free to make and unmake their society, even as they render its laws ineluctable, necessary and absolute. (Latour 1993: 36–7)

It is really not clear which way we should go: if the problem is that of *how to conceptualise* nature and society, then the issue is not an ontological one and can be best addressed theoretically or even methodologically. But if Latour is really pushing for a new ontology, then the one he now offers is not at all richer than the conventional one that knew *at least* of nature, culture, society and humans. We now have instead a cosmos that has completely flattened and is populated by networks alone: only networks are real because they are well constructed, only networks are viable because they speak various languages, only networks allow unstable

components to become ‘scientific’, ‘artistic’ or ‘economic’. Ontological plurality fails to emerge because *all* is now subordinated to an endless flow of networks; all we can learn and experience we learn and experience because it has successfully become real *as a network*.

A second issue refers directly to the question of the status of the human inside Latour’s work. The problem here can be introduced in the same way as above: *either* do humans exist but we have never understood them (in a milder form: modern Western metaphysics has fundamentally misconstrued humanity) *or* they don’t exist and this is what explains the difficulties we have in understanding the world. Similar to what happens to the argument on the differentiation of various domains, one is reminded here of Niklas Luhmann’s (2012) thesis that individuals are external to society.¹³ But what for Luhmann counted above all as a requirement of methodological consistency (and even in that softer case it remained always a constant source of epistemological and normative headaches), Latour has again turned this into an ontological issue. Quite clearly, however, it is one thing to accept that the traditional volitional, dispositional, affective and indeed moral connotations of the human are in need of permanent redefinition – I should like to think that my book is a contribution to *that* kind of reflection – and quite another to uphold the full reversibility that Latour favours: humans are visible only if and when they are part of a network. My point is simple – banal even – and suggests that the very terms with which Latour himself *justifies* his intellectual enquiry do require a strong and in fact highly conventional conception of the human. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, for instance, he is concerned with such questions as global warming and the atomic bomb and in *An Enquiry into the Modes of Existence* he speaks at length about the revival of fundamentalism, poverty, misogyny and colonialism as well as ubiquitous ecological dangers (Latour 2013: 142–56, 268–91). But because these are only understandable as *normative* motifs, he has to affirm in practice what he rhetorically denies: the ‘wes’ and ‘theys’ that ultimately care for these problems are, of course, human beings.¹⁴ Can there be anything *more* modern than Latour’s dissatisfaction with modernity’s own self-descriptions? His work belongs to the decidedly modern genre in which modernity is in permanent need of full reconsideration: it is a thoroughly modern attempt to account for the modern dissatisfaction

¹³ On the sociological and philosophical implications of Luhmann’s position, see Mascareño (2012) and Miranda (2012). I briefly come back to this question in the *Epilogue*.

¹⁴ There is, even, a *humanist* plea that humans have not counted *enough* throughout human history: ‘humans have always counted less than the vast population of divinities and lesser transcendental entities that give us life’ (Latour 2004: 456).

with the modern experience of unfulfilled promises that come out of modernity's own successes and failures. Above all, it offers a view that modernity can only be described adequately if we do so on the basis of the same claim to originality that is so dear to the moderns: this time, however, *we shall succeed*.

My second example comes from Rosi Braidotti's (2013) recent book on posthumanism and a first thing to note is that her work belongs to a genre that is constituted by its own rules: the kind of arguments that Latour substantiates by some form of first-hand empirical research are here introduced through a combination of speculative, philosophical and scientific arguments that are then fleshed out through examples coming from science fiction, popular culture and political criticism. In Braidotti's version, modernity is defined by two fundamental processes: the constant obsession with technological innovations and a general trend towards the transvaluation of values. While these are fundamentally ambivalent processes because they offer both challenges and opportunities, her critical standpoint is that, what emerges through promises of emancipation for all has, on the contrary, been built on the systematic exclusion of the many. Through her debt to Deleuze and Guattari, Braidotti's *critique* of humanism belongs directly in the lineage that can be traced back to Heidegger's fundamental conviction that the modern belief in humanity is a pernicious illusion and that 'Humanism' (with capital H) is nothing but the violent and exclusionary master-ideology of the West that encapsulates all that is wrong with modernity (Braidotti 2013: 13–30). This is arguably *the* central tenet of the posthumanist literature: humanism as a viable articulation of our contemporary normative sensibility is *already* dead (Davies 1997).¹⁵

Braidotti also follows postmodern Heideggerianism when she claims that, although her arguments may appear to be a form of anti-humanism, this is not in fact the case. This inability to commit fully to an anti-humanist

¹⁵ Braidotti is arguably more committed to posthumanism than other salient writers in this field; for instance, Donna Haraway (2008: 19) explicitly disavows the use of the term. Given her reliance on Latour's ontology and the reductionist account of normativity that transpires in her adoption of intersectionality theory, however, my criticism above applies. Even more poignant, however, is the fact that all Haraway's main arguments about species coming together make perfect sense from the most radical of anthropocentric perspectives: hers are stories of people who love animals and change the way they see and relate to the world, including themselves, because *they* love animals. Given that the humans she speaks about are ultimately common people, it is no surprise that she *is* able to articulate her normative motifs far more consistently than Braidotti. Also, William Connolly (2011) offers a nuanced redefinition of agency beyond anthropocentrism and one may argue that his reference to the 'human predicament' stands against posthumanism. Yet his argument on *becoming* pushes him towards the posthumanist mainstream.

perspective can be explained by the fact that, both cognitively and normatively, she requires an idea of subjectivity which cares about the world and *is worth caring for*. Subjectivity remains a key theoretical cornerstone of her posthumanist project because only there can she anchor the agency that needs to be defended and promoted (2013: 50–4). Anti-humanism is here found untenable on grounds that are indeed similar to Latour's: first, because as a form of *critique*, Braidotti's discourse requires normative motifs that, despite the rhetoric, can *only* be introduced as *human* concerns for dignity, justice, solidarity and freedom. Second, human beings matter because they are the ones who mobilise normative ideas in society, they are the ones who are in possession of the creative capacities of human action itself. As she deconstructs the injustices and aberrations of humanist discourses – anthropocentrism, androgenism, racism – Braidotti has no difficulty in ubiquitously appealing to these same traditional humanist values. The explorations into the limits, exceptions and contradictions of Western humanism are potentially illuminating, but the Heideggerian influence is again apparent in the elitism that ensues. On the one hand, her whole normative project depends on the need to speak 'on behalf' of those who cannot do so themselves and, whether we like it or not, this is a quintessentially modern political issue. On the other hand, Braidotti does not really know what to do with the values and institutions of the modern world: she derides them as merely ideological but does not reflect on the fact that she can only do so because she takes them for granted: people die every day for the right to work, basic human decency and equality before the law.¹⁶ Quite rightly, Braidotti takes issue with a mistaken logic of reconciliation that underpins various forms of humanism; in her view, the intrinsic violence that is involved when the particular is *sublated* in the universal. But rather than radically questioning this way of thinking, she merely inverts the normative vector so that humanism can now be construed as *wholly* negative – i.e. the intrinsically racist, violent and exclusionary ideology of white, adult, heterosexual and bourgeois men who have exported themselves violently the world over. This 'intersectionality of privilege' is different from an intersectionality of exclusion only because *dystopianism* has now replaced older ideas of reconciliation. Post-humanists cannot consistently articulate their normative positions because they are unable to clarify what is exactly the human core for which they *are* prepared to make a positive case.¹⁷ As Hans Blumenberg (1987: 179) ironically

¹⁶ Interestingly, a toned-down version of this argument can be found in Charles Taylor's (1989: 6) uncritical remark, in the opening of *Sources of the Self* that, when it comes to these values, 'we are all universalists now'. Sadly, we are anything but (see Chapter 6).

¹⁷ There is a parallel literature on trans-humanism that, against the posthumanist mainstream, retains the more conventional humanist notion that our species still holds pride of place in the cosmos. Their redefinition of the human centres on the extent to which

remarks: ‘The final and most subtle forms of anthropocentrism always remain hidden from their critics’.¹⁸

Let me finally turn to the fields of cognitive science and artificial intelligence, where I would like to focus on the work of Edinburgh philosopher Andy Clark (2001, 2003). One of the original proponents of the so-called ‘extended mind’ thesis (Clark and Chalmers 2008 [1998]), he has argued that the ways in which we understand our cognitive skills cannot be reduced to self-contained processes that occur inside our ‘skin and skull’. Rather, he suggests that we can only explain cognitive processes if we allow in and explain the role of all sorts of *external* factors – buildings and smartphones, pens and books. This can be seen as a form of posthumanism because it points towards the *softening* – if not the downright *dissolution* – of a self-contained idea of the human being and its agential powers. Clark then *rejects* the idea that ‘the cognitive’ can be defined unproblematically and indeed makes these reflections on cognitive processes central to the comparison between the two main ‘creatures’ he is interested in: humans and robots (Clark 2008: 86). For our purposes, there are three main tenets of this argument that are particularly relevant:

1. Humans are defined by the constant interplay between mind, body and world and to that extent they are anything but ‘locked-in agents’ (Clark 2008: 30). Rather than looking at the *differences* between internal process that allegedly occur ‘inside’ our body/mind and external ones that take place ‘out there’ in the world, Clark contends that all cognitive operations truly occur in their interface. While robots are of course unlike humans in several regards, the key argument is that *in its outcomes*, their cognitive stance is potentially *indistinguishable* from those of humans.¹⁹

current technological innovations may *enhance* our cognitive skills while making our continuous *organic* existence potentially unnecessary. Building on the ‘precautionary’ tradition of philosophical anthropology, however, my position is that, should our carbon materiality be eventually replaced by a silicon one, a ‘proactionary’ principle may have become redundant because we would have ceased to be human in any meaningful way *vis-à-vis* past and present experiences of it. See Fuller (2011) and Fuller and Lipinska (2014).

¹⁸ The normative thrust of the argument has been well captured by Gillian Rose (1995: 117): ‘Previously, modern philosophical *irrationalism* was seen retrospectively by philosophers and historians as the source of the racist and totalitarian movements of the twentieth century. Now, philosophical reason itself is seen by postmodern philosophers as the general scourge of Western history. To reason’s division of the real into the rational and the irrational is attributed the fatal Manichaeism and imperialism of the West’. For this reason, below I will be paying no consideration to disingenuous, cynical, partial or deluded appeals to humanist values.

¹⁹ The common reference point here is Alan Turing’s (2005 [1950]) famous imitation game that was devised in order to answer the question ‘can machines think?’. In a game whose

2. The *design* of robots as increasingly intelligent and indeed mobile creatures is a major resource in helping us to better understand cognitive and indeed wider mechanical processes of human beings themselves. This is an argument that resembles traditional etiological and sociobiological notions that humans can and do learn about themselves as they compare their own ways of doing things with those of others creatures: ‘The human agent’, says Clark, ‘is nature’s expert at becoming expert’ (2008: 75).
3. While technological innovations have been a constant throughout human history, we now witness a new phase in which we move from ‘mere’ embodiment to more recent technologies of ‘basic’ and ‘profound’ embodiment. Similar to Scheler’s tripartite classification of plants, animals and humans, Clark also speaks of an incremental degree of openness in the reactions to external stimuli. The current generation of humans are ‘natural-born cyborgs’ because we have grown predisposed to permanently innovate technologically on central dimensions of our human existence: ‘A profoundly embodied creature *or robot* is thus one that is highly engineered to be able to learn to make maximal problem-simplifying use of an open-ended variety of internal, bodily, or external sources of order’ (2008: 43, my italics).

We can see the way in which all three propositions point in a posthumanist direction. Not only do they favour a levelling out between humans and robots, they reject conventional notions that humans are self-contained and discard ideas of human supremacy and exceptionalism. When humans are treated as *creatures* in a way that resembles animals, plants, robots and cyborgs, then the *artificial can teach the natural*. In contradistinction to Latour or Braidotti, however, Clark does not make the final ontological move of posthumanism. Rather than dissolving the human, he emphasises that there is an ultimate *organic* reference to humans:

[i]n rejecting the vision of human cognitive processing as *organism bound*, we should not feel forced to deny that it is (in most, perhaps all, real-world cases) *organism centered*. It is indeed primarily (though not solely) the biological organism that, courtesy especially of its potent neural apparatus, spins and maintains (or more minimally selects and exploits) the webs of additional structure that then form parts of the machinery that accomplishes its own cognizing . . . Individual cognizing, then, is *organism centered even if it is not organism bound*. (Clark 2008: 123)

goal is to find out whether your interlocutor is male or female, there is a third participant that will offer various clues. If a machine is able to play this third-party role as well as a human would, then Turing contends that for all practical purposes we can say that the machine *can* think. See, classically, John Searle’s (2005 [1980]) critique of Turing’s thought experiment and Margaret Boden’s (2005) critique of Searle.

This argument that *cognitive expansion* depends on an *organic core* is one that I would like to retain. Clark compares different forms of creatures and argues for the autonomy and even superiority of machines with regard to a growing range of cognitive skills and processes. What matters to us, however, is that there is also a fundamental ontological irreversibility built into his claims: there is always, ultimately, a problem of *design*. On the material side, there is the *human* skill of building robots and technologies which can ‘do stuff’. More importantly, on the ideational side, this whole body of literature depends on the imagination of all kinds of *thought experiments* that allow for the testing of various arguments and counter-arguments: building robots is something humans have an interest in, care about, and this is the reason why they do it. If and when robots act ‘autonomously’ (and the term is of course very problematic), they are still working within a causal chain that was triggered by human motivations and actions. It is the refreshingly ludic side of this literature that makes my point: colleagues seem to really be having fun at trying to outwit one another. Thus seen, my argument then does not change if machines get much better than humans at playing chess, if machines create new games that are very much like chess, or even if machines create machines whose purpose is to create new games that are far more challenging than chess. What is uniquely human is the original impulse that leads us to play games at all: having fun, socialising, creating and improving on rules, getting better at them, etc.²⁰

Structure of the Book

Chapter 1 looks closely at the discussion on humanism that took place between Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger right at the end of the Second World War. In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre offered a defence of traditional humanist *values* – freedom and autonomy for all – on the traditional grounds of *anthropocentrism* – ‘man’ is the measure of all things – and *constructivism* – the world we inhabit is wholly of human making. In *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger responded by making three fundamental counterclaims: First, through its egalitarianism and constructivism, humanism is itself to blame for the war and its atrocities; second, ‘man’ cannot be made a source of value so we ought to worship higher forms of ‘being’; and third, a new elite of poets and thinkers is needed to restore human dignity; they are to become the self-appointed ‘shepherds of being’. I then look at Jacques Derrida’s intervention in this

²⁰ Differently put, at stake here is not so much a question of artificial *intelligence* but of artificial *life* itself.

debate in order to construe more fully the post- and indeed anti-humanist environment within which later debates have taken place. A sharper distinction between the (necessary) critique of anthropocentrism and the (equally necessary) renewal of humanist values is a main lesson that will inform the rest of the book.

After reassessing this debate on humanism, the book looks at seven writers with the help of which I try to unpack some of the key anthropological dimensions that will allow us to construe a universalistic principle of humanity. The ‘anthropological question’ is arguably not the central concern for any of these writers; their substantive contributions lie elsewhere and include of course a number of very different areas: from general epistemology to totalitarianism via ethical naturalism and economic sociology. Yet they all felt at some stage the need to articulate out explicitly the conceptions of the human with which they had been operating, more or less implicitly, up to that point. The order of the chapters is chronological and their focus is on one particular anthropological dimension. **Chapter 2** focuses on Hannah Arendt’s idea of *self-transcendence* as the human capacity with which we look at others and ourselves *as if* from an external position; self-transcendence as a form of withdrawal from the world but which is only possible to humans as eminently worldly beings. I reconstruct Arendt’s distinction between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* and unpack their defining anthropological features as largely autonomous vis-à-vis particular historical conditions. Arendt’s critique of Kant’s utilitarianism then allows me to engage with her ideas of detached observation, cosmopolitan belonging and impartiality as well as to unpack what I contend is the idea of normative description that underpins her work. **Chapter 3** looks at Talcott Parsons’s idea of *adaptation* as the organic vortex that connects the various dimensions of human life to the natural environment. Parsons’s late work on the human condition is of interest because there he explicitly pursues the kind of anthropocentric perspective that he had consistently rejected for three decades as he developed his AGIL (Adaptation; Goal Attainment; Integration; Latency) model: at stake here is Parsons’s realisation that understanding the human can only be attempted from the inside out – it is a problem that matters only to humans themselves. Parsons’s multilayered approach to the human also becomes apparent as we revisit his work on medicine and the sick role as well as his writings on the theory of generalised symbolic media. **Chapter 4** discusses Hans Jonas’s understanding of *responsibility* as a human relation that creates normative obligations as a fact of *nature* rather than a fact of *reason*. Parental selflessness becomes for Jonas the archetype for all kinds of responsibility: there are some things that we must do because only we can do them and it is this power differential

that makes certain actions – e.g. looking after the planet – normatively obligatory. Jonas's original philosophical position takes the name of *philosophical biology* and can be described as a form of ethical naturalism: life and nature are his fundamental concepts and the normative standing of all living creatures can be ascertained both objectively – nature exists and is populated by living creatures – and subjectively – for these creatures, the continuation of *their* life is valuable in itself. The continuation of nature in general is a precondition for the continuation of human life, but neither can be taken for granted in our technological civilisation.

Chapter 5 reconstructs Jürgen Habermas's idea of *language* as the quintessentially *social* aspect of human life that is never altogether detached from its individual instantiation. Indeed, the reconstruction of Habermas's rendition of the linguistic turn and his project of a universal pragmatic lead us to reassess his original commitment to the idea of a communicative or interactive competence as the specifically human ability to make sense of the world, and interact efficiently in it, on the grounds of our ability for linguistic articulation. Habermas's explicit attempt to connect normative and descriptive propositions, his commitment to a universalistic orientation, and the fact that he is equally comfortable in sociological and philosophical debates, are all crucially important for my project. Chapter 6 then explores how Charles Taylor's idea of *strong evaluations* point to the human capacity for people to commit to those things that matter to them and which they can then use to organise the usually conflictive priorities that they experience in their lives. Taylor connects strong evaluations to the possibility of developing a more or less consistent idea of the self, the biographical articulation of a meaningful idea of who we are, which is in turn free from the individualistic fallacies that underpin most modern conceptions of identity. I will also explore Taylor's critique of modern proceduralism and comment on the, at times dogmatic and at times relativistic, implications of some of his propositions. Chapter 7 assesses Margaret Archer's notion of *reflexivity* as the key agential power through which people talk to themselves as they decide on their future courses of action. Archer's sociology of structure and agency matters because this experience of being partly free and partly constrained coincides with the ways in which people experience their own everyday circumstances. At the same time, there is her contention that agential powers are independent from structural ones and have causal powers that effectuate change in the social contexts within which they are necessarily exercised. As she builds on Marcel Mauss's distinction between a universal *sense* of self – that is to be found

transhistorically and transculturally – and culturally specific *concepts* of the self, her principle of humanity explicitly engages with questions about physical adaptation, practical accomplishments and social worth. [Chapter 8](#) reflects on Luc Boltanski’s work on reproduction and abortion in order to assess the dual natural and social dimensions of the *reproduction of life*. The delimitation of a principle of humanity had been a major concern in Boltanski and Thévenot’s (2006) earlier *On Justification*, and this later work on abortion is explicitly set out as a test case for those earlier formulations. Boltanski will distinguish between ‘flesh’ and ‘speech’ as the organic and social dimensions of human life and will construe an interesting typology between authentic-, tumoral- and techno-foetuses depending on how the duality of speech and flesh plays out in society. Boltanski’s own normative convictions are put to the test as he argues that, while abortions are *legitimate*, they cannot be construed as a *value*. The book closes with a short [Epilogue](#) that brings together its most relevant argumentative strands.²¹

In order to remain true to the general orientation of philosophical sociology, the book then includes three writers that we can call philosophers (Arendt, Jonas and Taylor), three self-declared sociologists (Parsons, Archer and Boltanski) and one writer who can be seen as either (Habermas). An enormous and usually extremely interesting debate surrounds the interpretation of every one of them – both in terms of the general orientation of their works and of several of their more specific contributions. Given that my goal is not to offer a comprehensive account of their approaches, for each chapter I have focused mostly on one or two texts where I think they succeed in making apparent their conception of the human. Some of my interpretations in this book may be seen as controversial and even partial, yet I expect each individual chapter to stand as a general argument on the anthropological dimension in question *and* as an essay on the respective writer’s main ideas.

As I finished writing this book, it became increasingly apparent that most chapters do speak about the *interplay* between human embeddedness and imagination. While these two point in the same direction as traditional ‘mind’ and ‘body’ distinctions, I suggest that we see them as neither the end points of a continuum nor two sides of the same coin. They are rather the central relational properties of

²¹ Readers familiar with contemporary social theory will notice that this organisation mirrors that of Hans Joas’s *The Genesis of Values* (2000). While our positions and questions differ, I found his way of framing together philosophical and sociological concerns extremely helpful: each chapter is then both interpretative of a particular author and substantive with regard to a specific issue.

our humanity: adaptation and responsibility are closer to embeddedness, self-transcendence and reflexivity are closer to imagination, while language, strong evaluations and the reproduction of life stand somewhat in between. It is this duality, and the difficult ways in which we continually re-elaborate it, the one that defines our common humanity.