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Being a Problem for Myself: Remarks on the Irreducibility of Human Being

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…mihi quaestio factus sum, et ipse est languor meus
I have become a problem for myself and this is my torment
[August., *Conf.*, X.33.50]

The Problem

One of the most deep-rooted interests of our conscious life, i.e. of our experience, is to known whether we as human beings are "unique" in ourselves and perhaps for someone else in particular; but paradoxically this claim is often considered a simple illusion or a mere construction.

Regardless, it is nevertheless true that "uniqueness" is something we desire; we desire to be truly ourselves, to realize our personality, to leave our personal mark in the world, to understand clearly the reason why we were born, to be loved (for our own sake). In other words, the desire for uniqueness coincides with the desire for freedom.

The most interesting point is not to take this desire for granted, but rather to focus on its nature. I think this is the way to discuss and verify the legitimacy of the two above mentioned interpretations of the specificity of human nature.

Let us a) start from the explanation of the paradigmatic philosophical positions which underlie these common perspectives; b) and then return to the phenomenon of the "desire for uniqueness", considering the "data" of our ordinary experience and posing again the question of whether there is indeed something "uniquely" human.

The Two (or Three) Paradigms

In the history of modern philosophy, we can identify two models for interpreting the uniqueness of human nature; let us call them *the illusion model* and *the construction model*. To use proper names, this is the alternative between Spinoza and Kant. The first claims that our individuality is only a finite, necessary mode of the great power of a mechanical nature, and contends that the uniqueness of human nature is only an effect of ignorance. The second claims that our individuality consists of the great power of human reason, whose task is the cultivation of moral freedom.

In the first case, human nature cannot ever exist as a purpose in itself; in the second case, the human being cannot be the finality of nature, however, it must be such a purpose in a supernatural world. What is interesting here is that in both positions the uniqueness of human nature is never actually "given."

The Illusion Model

To explain Spinoza's position—according to which human nature cannot exist as a purpose in itself because "all final causes are nothing but human fictions"—let me quote a famous passage from the *Ethics*. Spinoza is arguing with "theologians" and "metaphysicians" who claim that things are created by God for a special purpose:

> […] for example, if a stone falls from the roof on somebody's head and kills him, by this method of arguing they will prove that the stone fell in order to kill the man; for if it had non fallen for that purpose by the will of God, how could so many circumstances (and there are often many coinciding circumstances) have chanced to concur? Perhaps you will reply that the event occurred because the wind was blowing and the man was walking that way. But, they will persist in asking why the wind blew at that time and why the man was walking that way at the very time? If you again reply that the wind sprang up at that time because on the previous day the sea had begun to toss after a period of and that the man had been invited by a friend, they will again persist—for there is no end in questions—"But why was did the sea toss, and why was the man invited for that time?" And so they will go on and on asking the causes of causes, until you take refuge in the will of God—that is, the sanctuary of ignorance. Similarly, when they consider the structure of the human body, they are astonished, and being ignorant of the causes of such

> skilful work they conclude that it is fashioned not by mechanical art but by divine or supernatural art, and is so arranged that no one part shall injure another. As a result, he who seeks the true causes of miracles and is eager to understand the works of nature as a scholar, and not just to gape at them like a fool, is universally considered an impious heretic and denounced by those to whom the common people bow down as interpreters of nature and the gods. For these people know that the dispelling of ignorance would entail the disappearance of that astonishment, which is the one and only support for their argument and for safeguarding their authority.[1]

There is nothing unique in nature, because uniqueness is the very property of nature itself, assuming that uniqueness means necessity. Nature is the unique and absolute substance, i.e., it is God to the extent that God is the geometrical order of causes. It is remarkable here that for Spinoza, a finite being must be conceived, not for its contingency (that is, for the fact that it actually exists, but could also not exist), but instead it must be conceived only as something "limited by another thing of the same nature":

> A thing is called finite after its kind, when it can be limited by another thing of the same nature; for instance, a body is called finite because we always conceive another greater body. So, also, a thought is limited by another thought, but a body is not limited by thought, nor a thought by a body.[2]

The result is that a human being, like all finite beings, is not unique as a product of blind fortune, but as an expression of a divine necessity. Following Spinoza, we are forced to conclude that wonder is identified with ignorance. Indeed, divine necessity emerges as our intellectual knowledge understands blind fortune, not in terms of final causes, but as a "system" of measurable proportions. To explain the structure of the human mind Spinoza speaks of the *idea corporis*, meaning that what is uniquely human is not our capacity to transcend the physical realm of nature, but to understand it adequately and accurately.

We are really free when our mind grasps this scientific explanation. This "noetic" freedom—that is, the acknowledgment of the eternal necessity of nature—is the very source of intellectual happiness for man. Only the wise man—the man who is no longer ignorant—can be free, enjoying the naturalistic explication of everything

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[1] B. Spinoza, "Ethics," part I, Appendix, in *Complete Works*, ed. by M.L. Morgan, transl. by S. Shirley, Hackett Publ. Co., Indianapolis 2002, p. 241.
[2] Spinoza, "Ethics," part I, def. 2, in *Complete Works*, p. 217.

as the real fulfilment of himself. Clearly, we find here the metaphysical assumption of all monistic naturalisms, even though after Spinoza the image of nature changed radically.

The Construction Model

Now, let us move on to the second paradigm, the Kantian one. Unlike Spinoza, according to Kant a finality in nature is thinkable, but not in the form of a "determinant" judgment (that is, an intellectual judgment that gives a general rule under which particular cases of sensible experience are subsumed), but rather in the form of a merely "reflective" judgment (that is, a rational judgment that starts from the particular cases of sensible experience in order to find a general rule). Only the first kind of judgment—the determinant one—achieves a scientific, i.e., objective, knowledge of nature, intended as the realm of mechanical causes. The second kind—the reflective one—allows us to think of a finality in nature, that is, a sort of intentionality that unifies all empirical events and laws of nature. This intentionality is more a requirement of human reason than an effective cause in nature. In other words, our reason cannot rest in its quest for the unconditioned, that is, for the ultimate principle of reality, and at the same time it cannot determine the unconditioned in a scientific way, that is, it cannot really know it. Indeed, the human mind can really know only what is in space and time. The ultimate purpose of reality, like the first origin, falls outside these sensible conditions.

The finality of nature is, therefore, a product of human reflection. However, there is a special case in which we can fulfil this requirement of our reason. This happens in the realm of practical reason, i.e., in that special use of our reason in which it can and must be an appropriate cause in itself, namely the free cause of human actions. In this sphere of practical reason the finality of nature has to be considered with respect to the ultimate purpose of the existence of a world. But the final destination of all creation is the freedom of man. Therefore, the uniqueness of human nature is the supersensible purpose of the whole of nature.

Let me quote an interesting passage from the *Critique of Judgment*.

> A final end is that end which needs no other as condition of its possibility. […] [T]he final end cannot be an end that nature would be sufficient to produce in accordance with its idea, because it is unconditioned. For there is nothing in nature (as a sensible being) the determining ground of which, itself

> found in nature, is not always in turn conditioned; and this holds not merely for nature outside of us (material nature), but also for nature inside of us (thinking nature)—as long as it is clearly understood that I am considered only that within me which is nature. A thing, however, which is to exist as the final end of an intelligent cause necessarily, on account of its objective constitution, must be such that in the order of ends it is dependent on no further condition than merely the idea of it.
>
> Now we have in the world only a single sort of beings whose causality is teleological, i.e., aimed at ends and yet at the same time so constituted that the law in accordance with which they have to determine ends is represented by themselves as unconditioned and independent of natural condition but yet as necessary in itself. The being of this sort is the human being, though considered as noumenon: the only natural being in which we can nevertheless cognize, on the basis of its own constitution, a supersensible faculty (freedom) and even the law of the causality together with the object that it can set for itself as the highest end (the highest good in the world).
>
> Now of the human being (and thus of every rational being in the world), as a moral being, it cannot be further asked why (*quem in finem*) he exists. His existence contains the highest end itself, to which, as far as he is capable, he can subject the whole of nature; contrary to which at least he cannot regard himself as subject to any influence of nature, or against which at least he need not hold himself to be subjected by any influence from nature.—Now if things in the world, as dependent beings as far as their existence is concerned, need a supreme cause acting in accordance with ends, then the human being is the final end of creation; for without him the chain of ends subordinated to one another would not be completely grounded; and only in the human being, although in him only as subject of morality, is unconditional legislation with regard to ends to be found, which therefore makes him alone capable of being a final end, to which the whole of nature is teleologically subordinated.[3]

Thus, morality is the key to explaining the real uniqueness of human nature: this uniqueness does not belong to phenomenal man (*homo phaenomenon*) but to noumenal man (*homo noumenon*). What is really unique in human being is not *what he is*—since he is always conditioned by natural causes—but *what he should be*, i.e., the moral use of his freedom. When is freedom used morally? Only when it obeys the pure rational law of moral obligation. I can be free because I am rational. In this perspective,

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[3] I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, § 84, ed. by P. Guyer, transl. by P. Guyer & E. Matthews, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2000, pp. 301, 302-303.

the unique in human nature is the task of a continuous construction, i.e., the cultivation of human nature through moral reason. Man is a product of nature and at the same time he is the producer of culture.

It is worth noting that, in a Kantian perspective, only morality, not happiness, is the final end of creation. For Kant, indeed, happiness remains something subjective, a "first person" speech (as it were), always conditioned by the particular and the contingent, hence by sensible factors. On the contrary, the final purpose must be unconditioned and that is why morality supersedes happiness. In the noumenal realm, only a moral man, as he obeys the *a priori* law of reason, can be a happy man.

We see here the matrix of all modern "trascendentalisms" in explaining the uniqueness of human nature, a "third person" speech (as it were).

The Third Paradigm

These two ways of approaching the problem of the uniqueness of human nature have proceeded in parallel, but sometimes they have intersected, outlining new perspectives.

Let me refer to one of these perspectives, actually a very ancient one, since it descends from the principles of Eastern Buddhist philosophy and, at the same time, a very modern one in its epistemological claims. In this third way, we find intertwined the purpose (of the first) to show the illusion of the human being as an individual substance and the task (of the second) to achieve the transcendental reconstruction of human nature. Let us call this way "Eastern-cybernetic."

It comes from Buddhism and through a long, hidden history, has arrived in our contemporary culture; it is the idea that every form of reality is itself empty of substance and impermanent. The ancient word 'Anicca' means impermanence; 'Anattā' means non-existence of the individual self, so the relativity of every existence. In this perspective we must destroy the idea that our "self" is something absolute and irreducible and we have, on the contrary, to de-individualize human nature depriving it of its own self. What does this mean: an I without a self? A human individual without individuality? It means that a human being is never the owner of him/herself or the principal agent of his/her actions: s/he is only a point of confluence in the wide web of relations that constitutes nature. In this sense my identity is just a provisional and ever changing merging of all the relations into which I enter. The only possibility to reaffirm a kind of uniqueness is balancing, checking, and organizing these different forces (i.e., relations). From impermanence to self-construction.

On the one hand the individual is no longer a center of power and on the other his/her mind expands and structures itself as a wide system of relations outside the body (outwards).

This is the idea of the ecological mind already suggested fifty years ago by Gregory Bateson:

> The individual mind is immanent but not only in the body. It is immanent also in pathways and messages outside the body; and there is a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a sub-system. This larger Mind is comparable to God and is perhaps what some people mean by "God," but it is still immanent in the total interconnected social system and planetary ecology.
>
> Freudian psychology expanded the concept of mind in-wards to include the whole communication system within the body—the autonomic, the habitual, and the vast range of unconscious processes. What I am saying expands mind out-wards. And both of these changes reduce the scope of the conscious self. A certain humility becomes appropriate, tempered by the dignity or joy of being part of something much bigger. A part—if you will—of God.[4]

No wonder that the name of this new "naturalistic theology" is for Bateson "cybernetic epistemology":

> All biological and evolving systems (i.e., individual organisms, animal and human societies, ecosystems, and the like) consist of complex cybernetic networks, and all such systems share certain formal characteristics. Each system contains subsystems which are potentially regenerative, i.e., which would go into exponential "runaway" if uncorrected. […] The regenerative potentialities of such subsystems are typically kept in check by various sorts of governing loops to achieve "steady state." Such systems are "conservative" in the sense that they tend to conserve the truth of propositions about the values of their component variables—especially they conserve the values of those variables which otherwise would show exponential change. Such systems are homeostatic, i.e., the effects of small changes of input will be negated and the steady state maintained by *reversible* adjustment.»[5]

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[4] G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Ballantine Books, New York 1972. pp. 461-462.
[5] Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, p. 441.

According to the ecological view, the uniqueness of human nature is interpreted only in its relations with the environment; this is true only if we take nature as a biosphere inhabited by an immanent Mind that provides the human mind with an unceasing self-control. For Bateson, this perspective allows us to solve the age-old problem of the purpose of nature. In cybernetic epistemology we have the idea that the self-correcting circuit gives a possible model for the adaptive actions of organisms. The problem of the purpose is solved through the self-control model. Every step of self-correcting is a new level of learning, in which the individual mind sees ever more its systemic framework. Normally, our consciousness, insofar as it is related to the problem of purpose, prevents us from continuing along that learning curve. In cybernetic epistemology, self-consciousness can finally become the ecological mind:

> On the one hand, we have the systemic nature of the individual human being, the systemic nature of the culture in which he lives, and the systemic nature of the biological, ecological system around him; and, on the other hand, the curious twist in the systemic nature of the individual man, whereby consciousness is, almost of necessity, blinded to the systemic nature of the man himself. Purposive consciousness pulls out, from the total mind, sequences which do not have the loop structure which is characteristic of the whole systemic structure. If you follow the "common-sense" dictates of consciousness you become, effectively, greedy and unwise—again I use "wisdom" as a word for recognition of and guidance by a knowledge of the total systemic creature.[6]

What is Unique?

The three positions mentioned above sketch out a very unusual path. We started from the interpretation of the uniqueness of human nature as a metaphysical illusion, then we moved to its interpretation as a transcendental construction; and finally we arrived at a systemic self-control.

In each of these approaches to the problem of the uniqueness of human beings, we can also find a reference to real factors in the dynamics of our conscious life. It is true that our existence is determined by necessary factors, just as it is true that each of us has to "actualize" and to "build" our own identity in the world; finally, it is

[6] Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, p. 434.

equally true that our individual being is always involved in a wider system of environmental relations. Each of these accounts, however, presents itself as the solution to the entire experience and, consequently, claims to correct the intuitive experience we have of ourselves.

In brief, three corrections are proposed:

a/ No finite being is contingent; it does not depend upon anything else for its existence, but on the necessary power of nature. Outside of this power there is no purpose.

b/ The specificity of the human being is not in the order of being—that is, in the chain of natural causes—but in the order of what should be—that is, of moral law. The individual is a purpose in him/herself only if s/he obeys the *a priori* law of reason; only in this case can we see him/her as an unconditioned being.

c/ The individual is him/herself only in a system and as a system; we can understand his/her whole nature—uniqueness—only in his/her relation to the environment. The idea of purpose translates perfectly into the idea of self-correction.

Yet we could legitimately ask whether these correction models reach their goal, and whether there are any phenomena, in our experience, that are resistant to explanations of this sort and so that can testify to a possible uniqueness of human beings in nature.

I shall not discuss the legitimacy of isolating something which would be "unique" (hence irreducible) within and against the enchained series of natural (hence reducible) phenomena. Rather, I would like to focus on the common experience of our perception of reality (that reality which is "outside" of our mind and of what we ourselves are). I shall not be concerned with demonstrating whether it could or could not be explained by neurophysiological factors, but I shall consider the simple fact that our nature has the possibility a*)* to perceive something and have the consciousness of perceiving it; and b) to have this consciousness not only as a record of things, events, persons, facts, etc., but also as an awareness of this being conscious. In simple terms, we are self-conscious.

What kind of "self" is here the "object" of consciousness? What kind of relationship exists between the many different acts of perceiving and the agent of these perceptions? Do the perceived objects fill completely the consciousness that the perceiving subject has of him/herself? Is it possible to focus on the real "identity" of this strange agent only on the grounds of his/her performances and actions, i.e., through the impact of the external world on his/her receptive structures and, at the same time, through the re-action of the perceiving agent in order to "handle" and to

"construct" the perceived world? Is human nature totally determined by this play between "reception" and "construction"?

I would like to propose three phenomena, well known in our experience, which can serve to outline a possible "uniqueness" in human nature.

The Capacity of Perceive

Human beings have the strange capacity to perceive the world and themselves, posing the question of the meaning of this act and, furthermore, the question of the meaning (direction and perspective) of their own experience (experience as a perception searching for meaning).

We are not dealing with a supervenient level, something added to a simple, natural condition, but rather with a genuine mode of living that nature. More precisely, we are not dealing with the emergence of a theoretical position different from a purely empirical one, but rather with a constitutive dimension of our being in the world. To ask "why" is not an intellectual, abstract exercise of the mind, a specific philosophical aptitude, but a characteristic posture of a human being. Most of the time this posture is not thematized; only sometimes it emerges clearly—when we feel wonder or boredom, pain or joy, indifference or hope—pressing ourselves to ask why we are what we are and why we are, why certain events happen and what their happening requires of ourselves. Without this "pre-reflexive consciousness" we would probably not feel our existence and our body as properly ours. The uniqueness of man is not in being a subject detached from nature, who observes nature from his/her vantage point; on the contrary, a human being constitutes him/herself as a never ending relationship with the world, people and things. Questioning the meaning of what exists is a specifically human mode of actualizing this relation. No one could ask about meaning if he/she were not touched by a factor or event that provoked him/her to ask. Of course, most of our questions are cultural products, but we should ask how our cultures could have been produced without these very questions.

Stating what distinguishes the ontological structure of "being in each case mine" (*Jemeinigkeit*), Heidegger once wrote:

> Looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, choosing, access to it—all these ways of behaving are constitutive for our inquiry, and therefore are modes of Being for those particular entities which we, the inquirers, are ourselves. Thus to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make

> an entity—the inquirer—transparent in his own Being. The very asking of this question is an entity's mode of *Being*; and as such it gets its essential character from what is inquired about—namely Being. This entity, which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term 'Being-there', *Dasein*.[7]

The questioning is possible, since the understanding of meaning is something that belongs to our being-human, to our perceptual structure, to our vision of and our listening to the world, and to our inner consciousness. This understanding is like a structure of "acceptance" or "reception" of data, in which the amazing hooking or interlocking between our perceptual abilities and the world happens, together with the even more amazing perception that the world is given to us. This is not a mere "registration," but the emergence of an active and (one might say) "creative" response to the impact with data. To this creativity—typical of a being who is nevertheless finite and dependent on all his/her conditioning—I give the name "questioning" of meaning.

Man is a question-posing being.—So the resistant point is: why do we pose questions?

Desire

Human beings have not only many needs, but they also know that strange phenomenon called desire. A simple need cannot be identified with a desire because desiring is an open-structured intentionality that can never be completed in a co-determined satisfaction.

One of the most common ways to understand desire is to see it as a lack of satisfaction. When we desire something, we refer to something we do not have yet or do not have any longer. It is something we need precisely because it is something we lack. At the same time, desiring shows that we are already in a very special relationship with the object of desire, which "attracts" us towards it, invites us, questions us.

If need is determined primarily by a force which drives us and acts from behind (so to speak), desire, on the other hand, is driven by a force before us, which "catalyzes" our consciousness. In other words, desire is made up of "absence" or

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[7] M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 2, transl. by J. Macquarrie & E. Robison, Blackwell, Oxford 2004, pp. 26-27.

"lack" and of "presence" as well, since its object carries an active and positive action, even though it is still not enjoyed by us as a specific object.

The object of desire is therefore always greater than the measure of need. Moreover, we all have had the seemingly contradictory experience of desiring something we are not lacking, and yet it is never enough to us; of feeling a persistent and permanent need, not for a lack of satisfaction, but "within" satisfaction itself and because of it. We can find it in some paradigmatic cases, such as in enjoying beauty, in the freedom of playing, in the feeling of love. These are cases in which the satisfaction of a need not only does not extinguish the desire, but rather generates it.

We can say that the difference between need and desire is in *time*: when a particular need is satisfied, it is "burned" (so to speak) and then time goes on again, in a never-ending reiteration. So, after satisfaction, a further and undetermined need arises in a compulsion to repeat. Only desire opens up (as it were) present time and stretches it out as memory and expectation.

It is a specifically human time, that is, not the time we measure with a clock, but the time of our inner consciousness and being in the world. For its temporal structure, desire is an ever open and an ever questioning dynamic. It demonstrates that our individuality is constituted by an essential relationship with an alterity. For now, let the nature of this alterity be undetermined and let us focus instead on the fact that the other is a genuine "given" to our conscious life, i.e., a given that cannot be "consumed" and "exhausted," not because we cannot reduce or extinguish others through our actions, but because our desire testifies that there is an irreducible "other" which stimulates me to be an "I".

As Jacques Lacan writes:

> Man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other.[8]

If we figure out that the desire to be recognized, preferred, and loved is not like an interrupted beaten track but an everlasting dynamic rooted in our unconscious life, then we can conclude that the desire of the other is not an act or a product of the "I" but exactly what allows the "I" to be.

Man is a restless being.—So the resistant point is: why don't explanations and satisfactions ever satisfy us?

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[8] J. Lacan, *Function and Field of Speech in Language*, in *Ecrits—A Selection*, transl. by A. Sheridan, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 1977, p. 58.

"Nothingness"

Human beings are the only beings capable of thinking of "nothingness." This is the sign that our consciousness perceives things, events, the entire world in thinking of their provenance and their contingency.

I am not just referring to our capacity to perceive the "no longer" of something that existed before or the "not yet" of what will be; neither I am just referring to the capacity of our mind and language to make negative judgments. The nothingness I am talking about (if one can really talk about "nothing"!) is not the residue of annihilation in terms of the loss or removal of something, nor is it a logical tool, that of negation.

The human being thinks of nothingness not because s/he doesn't think of the being of things; on the contrary, s/he can think of nothingness just because s/he perceives the givenness of things, their positive presence. Things are never just what they are. They have (so to speak) a fourth dimension, since we perceive them in that they come-to-being, in that they are given, they happen. Things are "data" in that they are "events," that is, things are never abstract entities, but historical presences happening in space and time.

This has to do with the wonder that something exists rather than nothing, and that which exists has in itself the trace of its origin, i.e., not only its initial "production" or coming-to-being, but rather the present dimension of its dependence on the gift of being.

Some philosophers intend nothingness as the mark of two fundamental metaphysical experiences: the first is the discovery that being as a totality is always indefinitely greater than the sum of everything that exists, and that it can never be the object of our empirical knowledge. It would be a mystery or a heuristic fiction which allowed us to think of the ultimate origin as both the primordial and contextual background against which things stand. The second experience indicated by the word "nothing" is the experience of the impossibility to conceive ourselves—human beings—as determined entities among others, because all other entities are determined by their natural or social features, while man is structurally incomplete, open, transcendent. Man's main feature is not actuality, but possibility; not a possibility as a virtuality which tends to fulfilment, but a possibility which can never be fulfilled, thus a genuine impossibility. In this ontological difference between the determination of beings and the nothingness of human beings would lie our freedom.

The totality of being and the transcendence (or freedom) of man make the word "nothing" a very special one and testify that it is not the emptiest concept, but one of the richest we can conceive. The human being—as a finite being—is always

beyond him/herself. All other finite entities are in themselves conditioned, delimited by what surrounds, precedes and follows them, while only the human being stands before nothingness and s/he is marked by the ever open possibility of being.

However, the concept of nothingness is ambiguous. To stand before nothingness also means to be exposed to the loss of self, to risk the alienation or dissolution of one's own self. The nihilistic notion of nothingness is the reverse side of the metaphysical notion of nothingness. Yet how is it possible to hold together the wonder of the gratuitous provenience of one's own self and of the world (the nothingness of contingency) with the anxiety or sadness for the ever possible reduction of oneself to nothing (the nothingness of loss)?

The key to understanding these two meanings and so the two sides of our ability to think of nothingness, is that we are finite beings "capable" of the infinite. The infinite can be understood both as the permanent and present origin of reality—something like the vanishing point of the finite—and as the irreducible point of our finite human individuality. We think of nothingness (in wonder as in fear) just because we are relation to being and this relation is the way the infinite opening of a finite being manifests itself.

When we speak of an infinite opening of human nature, we do not just refer to a "feeling" of ourselves, but an act and a given of knowledge. Of course, the known infinite, just like known nothingness, seems a contradiction in terms. Perhaps we have to see things from another perspective and ask: can we humanly perceive things, ourselves and the world, without the thought of the infinite?

Let me clarify my point by going back to Descartes and his idea of the infinite, as presented in the Third Meditation. First of all, it has to be said that I am not referring to the Cartesian solution for a dualistic explanation of the mind/world nexus; it was not in virtue of his dualism—which distinguishes *res cogitans* from *res extensa*—that Descartes could think of the idea of the infinite, but rather, his dualistic choice was just *one* possible consequence of this idea (whether correct or incorrect doesn't matter here). The thought of the infinite is a matrix of our consciousness, which comes before any dualistic or monistic explanation of the uniqueness of human nature.

Let us focus on the following consideration, leaving aside the way Descartes proves the existence in human thought of an infinite substance (more precisely God, a "substance infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, all-knowing, all-powerful, and by which I myself, and every other thing that exists, if any such there be, were created"):

> And I must not think that, just as my conceptions of rest and darkness are

> arrived at by negating movement and light, so my perception of infinite is arrived at not by means of a true idea but merely by negating the finite. On the contrary, I dearly understand that there is more in an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself. For how could I understand that I doubted or desired—that is, lacked something—and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?[9]

This seems to me the most interesting sign of the uniqueness of human nature: i.e., the fact that I could not perceive my own finiteness—nor my doubt and my desire—if I did not have the perceptual trace of the infinite. Our being-human is not a moment of being which tends to nothing, but rather it comes from nothing and from nothing it is continually pulled away.

Paradoxically, through his capacity to perceive nothingness, *man is an infinite-open being*.[10]

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[9] R. Descartes, *Meditation on First Philosophy*, III, transl. by J. Cottingham, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, transl. by J. Cottingham, R. Stroothoff, D. Murdoch, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 1984, vol. II, p. 31.

[10] For a more extended discussion of the themes presented in this text see: C. Esposito, *C'è qualcosa di irriducibile nell'umano?* [Is there Something Irreducible in the Human?], in L. Congiunti, G. Formica, A. Ndreca (a cura di), *Oltre l'individualismo. Relazioni e relazionalità per ripensare l'identità* [Beyond individualism. Relations and Relationality to Rethink Identity] Urbaniana University Press, Roma 2017, pp. 325-339 and the recent book of C. Esposito, *Il nichilismo del nostro tempo. Una cronaca* [The Nihilism of our Time, A Chronicle], Carocci, Roma 2021.