The Non-Anthropological Philosophy of Radical Pragmatism
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The fundamental claim I will be making in the following is that anthropology and pragmatism should be strictly opposed to each other as philosophical and systematic schools of thought. This claim should be understood not in a historical, but rather in an ideal-typical or programmatic and conceptual way. I am thus in no way arguing that these two philosophical positions are strictly opposed to each other as historical entities. I do want to claim, however, that there are compelling reasons for articulating an opposition between them. In order to explicate these reasons, we must, however, consider the philosophical history of anthropological and pragmatist approaches to philosophizing. The above assertion, which expresses a fundamental philosophical conviction, thus contains three elements, which will structure my remarks: first, we must be able to identify defining characteristics of the anthropological and pragmatic schools of thought that contradict each other and justify a systematic distinction between the two. Second, it must be convincingly shown from the history of philosophy that these characteristics can be ascribed to the respective school. This means that there must be good reasons for constructing an ideal-type distinction between the substantiated and historically relevant philosophies that call themselves either anthropological or pragmatist—implying that a history of these ways of thinking could be told in light of this construction. Third, this also implies that a connection can be made to contemporary issues that would render transparent the (in itself compelling) motivation of the proposed project, that is, the effectuation of this systematic distinction and its realization in the history of philosophy.

I.

I will begin by highlighting the essential characteristics of these two systematically opposed philosophical approaches. Philosophical anthropology is distinguished by its *essentialism* and *naturalism*, and connects these two axes by using *character studies* to posit an *essential human nature*. Pragmatist thought, on the contrary, decidedly rejects both the notion of a nature independent of *practice* as well as an essence transcending this dimension. Characterization is thus not part of the pragmatist paradigm. There is no room in the pragmatist image of thought for a mixture of the pure and the empirical character as can be found in the anthropological tradition, which differentiates people according to race, gender, folk psychology, mentality, temperament, historico-cultural and pathological stage of development, and so forth. The basic anthropological intention of resolving the so-called Cartesian dilemma not only regularly projects harmonious reconciliation as the goal of the development of humanity, but also the crisis situation as such in terms of alienation, decline, and degeneration. It projects, in other words, two distinct worlds, between which it then has to mediate in a complicated and romanticized way that is charged with mysticism and vitalism. In contrast, pragmatism rejects the two-world doctrine from the beginning, and not just in a second—and profoundly problematic—step. This difference was long misunderstood in clichéd treatments of pragmatism that saw it as *instrumentalism* in the sense of the *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (and *not* in Dewey's sense), or as misguided in a scientistic or vitalistic

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way. These misplaced criticisms are themselves based on metaphysical presuppositions deriving either from anthropology or the philosophy of history. While thinkers like Horkheimer denounce pragmatism precisely because they misunderstand its radical critique of metaphysics as an affirmative attitude towards "existing" social conditions, Scheler and the anthropologists insist on an understanding of nature grounded in the *humanities*, which they accuse pragmatism of having betrayed. The pragmatist concept of practice, however, is neither one-sidedly utilitarian (in the sense of an instrumental-rational concept of action) nor one-sidedly vitalistic. In fact it evades the opposition between nature and history, which still figures as the starting point of Odo Marquard's study of the history of anthropology, one of the most forceful of its kind.[1] It thus becomes possible to make a case for the objections voiced from the perspective of natural philosophy to a social philosophy upgraded with the help of a philosophy of history, without at the same time appealing to a proto-social dimension of experience.[2] Following Richard Bernstein, we can say that the "pragmatic ethos" comprises the following points: *antifoundationalism*, the radical *contingency* of a future that is, in principle, open, a commitment to *pluralism*, a concept of *practice* that reflects collective contexts of lived experience, as well as a basic scientific willingness to *experiment*.[3]

It will be helpful to set out more precisely the three characteristics of anthropological thought listed above and to contrast them with the fundamentals of pragmatism. *First* there is the anthropological concept of nature: while philosophical anthropology is fundamentally naturalistic, either because it scientistically relies on the findings of the natural sciences or because it develops a *philosophical biology* itself whose basic object is "life," pragmatism rejects any attempt to separate an "actual" human nature from its concrete social and technical contexts. But nor does pragmatist thought make the mistake of harmonizing the mediations taking place in the life-world or of gearing them to the transcendent benchmark of historical progress. Its analytical force, which penetrates into the depths of experience once simply ascribed to "nature," shows that the presuppositions social theory inherits from the philosophy of history are problematic. Sensations, feelings, affects, passions—in short, our bodily and sensory existence as such—are thus, at their core, social realities (or fictions), even if they evade certain (potentially even predominating) practices and ways of thinking (and engage or produce others in their place). All current actions and discourses are caught up in power relations. While their interactions and foundations are indeed institutionalized, they nevertheless remain fragmentary, transitory, and the object of an open-ended process of negotiation.

Second, I put forward the claim that anthropology is essentialist. In contrast, pragmatism does not invoke a foundation reduced to systematic certitude that cancels out finite conditions and takes on the form of man when it is a matter of saving his unity and the integrity of his being. Anthropological anti-Cartesianism, on the other hand, laments the substantial loss of the integrity of man, that is, a natural state or an original, healthy balance, defined as a precise type of psycho-physical totality. As a rule, anthropologists think in terms of a transcendent ideal that reconfigures pluralist conditions into oppositional structures. The anthropological

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[1] Cf. Odo Marquard, *Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie. Aufsätze*. Frankfurt a. M. 1973, 122-144 and Marquard, *Transzendentaler Idealismus. Romantische Naturphilosophie. Psychoanalyse*. Köln 1987.

[2] Cf. Michael Hampe, „Szientistische und naturalistische Tendenzen im Pragmatismus", in: A. Hetzel, J. Kertscher, M. Rölli (ed.), *Pragmatismus – Philosophie der Zukunft?* Weilerswist 2008, 121-129.

[3] Cf. Richard Bernstein, "Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of Wounds", in: *APA Proceedings, Vol. 63, 3*, 1989, 5-18.

hostility toward scientific-mechanistic positions is expressed on the one hand as a diagnosis of the loss of essence (decline, dissociation, degeneration, perversion) and, on the other, as the necessity of recovering what was lost (the identity of the organism, magnetism, development, eugenics).[4] It makes little difference whether the image of the whole person is projected by a notion of progress derived from the philosophy of nature or materialism, or later by a "vitalist" anthropology. In either case the opposition between reason and progress is thought to hide a pulsating third term. The dualistic construct, which plays off, e.g., *life* against a mechanistic understanding of nature, is always the expression of the privileging of an instance (of the essential being), which is conjured from the plurality of pragmatic contexts in an, as it were, "theoretistic" way.

Third is the problem of characterization. The definition of a natural human essence that transcends all finite ways of being constitutes the point of reference not only for the empirico-transcendental doublet pointed out by Foucault, but also for the *characteristic* convertibility of anthropological definitions. The comparative logic established between the fields of physiology and psychology, but also the practices of conversion of concepts and theorems in the area of race, characteristics and temperaments, physiognomies, etc. participate in a regulation of essences. A significant projection screen for this interdiscursive transfer of knowledge, which endows the outcomes of the combinatorial procedures with a self-contained *anthropological* coherence, is the idea of development (originating in the philosophy of nature), which cannot be thought independently of a being that measures developmental intervals and identifies the stages of progress. Pragmatist thought on the other hand does not operate within the reduplication mechanism, inasmuch as it subordinates theoretical meaning to its practical implications—without, in turn, regarding contexts of action merely as a confused preliminary stage of the infinite determination of humanity and its gradual realization in the course of history. With a pluralistic feel for the diverse differences and their unpredictable relationships to each other, pragmatism combats this kind of dualistic knowledge hygiene and its clumsy way of establishing connections between the demarcated areas of nature and culture, body and soul, mind and matter. Nature just as much as culture disappears in an actual determination of non-totalizable pragmatic relations that strip "nature" and "culture" of their opposition, their strangely detached positions, and their essentialist cast.

II.

In hopes that I have succeeded in demonstrating the systematic opposition between anthropological and pragmatist thought in a sufficiently vivid way, it is now time to fill this construct with historical reality. I will begin with a few remarks on the contemporary use of the concept of philosophical anthropology. There seem to be four different takes on the

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[4] As Kant writes, the essence of man lies in the pure character of the person or the species. This ideal is understood as man's vocation to realize himself as fully as possible in the course of his cultural development. In this process, the natural rudiments of the sensual being caught in base desires mark precisely those layers that have to be rationally investigated, controlled, and appropriated in the course of progress. – Even in mid-century materialism, the human ideal is kept in force by simply applying it to reality as measured by the natural sciences. The role of opposition is then taken on by religious or speculative thought, which is responsible for the alienation of human nature from itself.

concept currently circulating: philosophical anthropology is understood, for one, simply as any philosophical engagement with the topic of man (normally in a somewhat more restricted sense of *human nature*). This is the notion underlying works on so-called Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, etc. anthropology. Then there is the widespread tendency—perhaps particularly in the German-speaking world—to regard the work of Plessner, Scheler, etc. as the founding documents of philosophical anthropology, which is then considered to be, at least in principle, a twentieth-century affair. In a somewhat more historically grounded way, the beginning of anthropological thought is situated in the philosophy of the 17th century, based on the first recorded usages of the term as well as the materialist and empiricist doctrine of man (from Bacon and Hobbes to Hume and Helvetius) and what is literally referred to as *medical* (or *physical*) *anthropology* with its roots in the mid-18th century.

I do not find any of this very convincing, and would like to argue instead that the only historically plausible theory can be that philosophical anthropology is a *modern* phenomenon that originated with Kant and critical philosophy and coincided with the end of classical natural history. Both Foucault and Marquard (independently from each other) have argued this very effectively and it has been substantiated by individual studies. The crucial fact here is that Kant's new critical approach undermines the metaphysical form of mediation between the two substances of body and soul. This means that anthropology can only be pragmatic, and can no longer, in the guise of a metaphysical psychology or a physiological discipline, establish scientifically founded connections between these traditionally separated domains. Pragmatic anthropology, in turn, is based on transcendental philosophy, whose basic classification into the three fundamental faculties adopts anthropology and puts it into practice, in the form of anthropological didactics pertaining to empirical matters of life and action. While this positioning prevents anthropological knowledge from being incorporated into and taking on a fundamental role in the context of systematic philosophy, it is also true that, on the contrary, the anthropological undertaking hereby absorbs premises derived from transcendental philosophy and strangely transforms their meaning. In the first component of pragmatic anthropology, the rationality of human nature is decisive for the representation and evaluation of the performance of the faculties and their pathological forms. In the areas of desire and cognition, the healthy and harmonious use of the senses and the imagination is always dependent on their rational formation, while emotional disturbances are thought to result from fantasy unregulated by reason or from the natural passivity of the senses. In the second component, anthropological characterization, the opposition between the pure and the empirical character is the dominant figure of thought.[5] If the person as such is rightfully ascribed a pure character, the empirical dimension of character study allows for a differentiation of human nature according to individual disposition, gender, race, and nationality. All in all, differences in character can be found both in the "technical disposition" of the organization of the body as well as in the "pragmatic disposition," that is, the capacity for culture.[6] All repudiation of the physiological method notwithstanding, Kant's concept of the character construes a physio-psychological unity, which he thinks of as a compact nature that relates to the pure, intelligible, or moral character according to the logic of progress. This leads to the denigration of naturally inhibited characters, whose normal paths of development

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[5] Cf. Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* [1798], Akademie-Ausgabe vol. 7. Berlin 1917, 117-333, here 285.
[6] Cf. Kant, *Anthropologie*, 323.

precisely do not extend to the formation of a pure character—women in distinction to men, the lower races in distinction to Europeans, and so forth.

In the wake of Kantian anthropology, which hardly left any traces as such in the history of philosophy, three basic types of anthropological thought became established in the early nineteenth century. Schelling's elaboration of a philosophy of nature inspired the broad current of so-called "romantic anthropology," while Hegel integrated philosophical anthropology into the framework of the philosophy of spirit. Finally, a positivist variety came into play in the context of the scientification of psychology; here Fries, who published his *New or Anthropological Critique of Reason* in 1807, is exemplary.[7] Without going into these different approaches in detail, I would like to highlight a few of their structural commonalities. The first thing that is striking is that all three varieties are founded on *natural philosophy*, in that, following Kant's concept of the organism in the *Critique of Judgment*, they give central place to a concept of life. Schelling and Hegel understand this concept in terms of a philosophy of identity, that is, as a concrete mediation of nature and spirit. But regardless of how precisely human organization is conceived, all of the above positions presuppose a *unity of character* that establishes an equivalence between the physiological and psychological determinations. It is in this sense that Schelling (and later also Hegel) interprets *sensibility, irritability,* and *reproduction*—to take up a famous example—as life functions, whose relationships to each other can be dialectically determined from the concept of nature and define an ascending scale of development. According to this scale, the predominance of the reproductive function characterizes "lower" beings and the predominance of the sensitive function "higher" ones, whereby sensibility effectively constitutes the organic basis of psychology. The characteristics of the brain correlate with the characteristics of intelligence, and a physiognomic logic is capable of drawing conclusions about one side based on an examination of the other. The unity of the (mental) interior and the (corporeal) exterior is based on the one hand in the *logic of the organization*, in that life itself structures its cohesion (and not a mechanistic causality); on the other, the two sides complement each other in their *logic of development*, in that stages of development can be determined in relation to an essence. Pathology of the psyche, ways of life that are criminal or dominated by habits (and addictive behavior), easily stirred up emotions, and so on, belong to an empirical character whose bodily constitution is correspondingly misshapen, wrapped up in the sensory-animal environment, ugly, or sick. Its biological characteristics are reflected—in accordance with its race, gender, disposition, temperament, and type—in its cultural manifestations and impose more or less natural limits to the given developmental possibilities of the human ideal.

The novelty and specificity of anthropological thought in all three of these cases is that it aims, from the perspective of a philosophy of nature, at the *whole person*, that is, at man as a physio-psychic entity. This unity is philosophically constructed or speculative, but is nevertheless preserved in the scientific anthropologies that will soon replace the philosophical ones. Because of anthropology's status as foundational philosophy, popular materialism and then later also Darwinism, the emerging social anthropologies, eugenics and racial hygiene all vest anthropology—as the discipline bringing together all scientific knowledge relevant to views of the world and of man—with a normative function.[8] In this sense, for instance, the

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[7] Cf. Marc Rölli, *Kritik der anthropologischen Vernunft*. Habilitationsschrift. Ms. 2008.

[8] We must keep in mind that all three of these traditions claim to practice philosophical anthropology as foundational philosophy (or first philosophy). Fries was the first to make this claim, but it is also made by

revolutionary significance of Darwin's theory of evolution is automatically situated in the field of anthropology. It is precisely mediating logic with its world-view positing function that perpetuates philosophical figures of thought not recognized as such.

III.   On the current relevance of a criticism of anthropology

Ethical debates in recent years have increasingly been marked by appeals to the "human." Responses to problems particularly in the field of so-called applied ethics frequently include a reference to a return of the human—a return that is associated with a "renaissance" of philosophical anthropology. In the ethics of technology and medical and environmental ethics, but also in other ethical fields that are currently springing up like mushrooms (the most recent creature seems to be "nanoethics"), and especially in the core field of bioethics, where "human life" as such is the subject, there is a demand for anthropological criteria that can contribute to the normative regulation of technological progress in the area of the life sciences. Broad discussions surrounding the new possibilities of genetic technology, for instance, revolve around the question whether "creating embryos for research purposes is an assault on human dignity."[9] Are human beings born, or do they already exist in the form of fetus or fertilized ovum? The current neuro-debates are conducted along similar lines in that "naturalism and the conception of man" constitute the beginning and end points of the discussion. The newly articulated need for anthropology is often connected with the diagnosis of a paradigm shift (effectively articulated by Hans Jonas), insofar as, in the era of reproductive medicine and genetic testing, human nature for the first time has itself become the object of technization.[10]

All this leads me to take a close critical look at this new engagement of philosophical anthropology. What is the problem here? *First*, the (bioethically motivated) recourse to anthropological knowledge is based on the premise that this knowledge entails or can provide ethically relevant claims about the *essence* of man. Habermas' move of deepening the foundations of discourse ethics from the perspective of the species in *The Future of Human Nature* is well known. He fixes the "ground of morality" in a universal, anthropological self-conception of man that is not modified in its (as it were "natural") core by ideological and cultural differences.[11] *Second*, the first point is regularly associated with a *naturalistic* position, which insists on an anthropological supplementation or justification of the autonomy-oriented ethical perspective by bringing into position a metaphysics of nature, aligned either with the dominant scientific function of evolutionary biology or the tradition of natural philosophy along with its teleological art of argumentation. *Third*, the revival of anthropological philosophizing satisfies a need for a *life-world* by seeking to harmoniously mediate between abstract moral principles and actual lived conditions, but also to render the traditional human self-conception compatible with scientific and technological developments.

Steffens, Heinroth, and others in the tradition of romantic anthropology, and finally also in Hegelianism, particularly by Feuerbach.

[9] Cf. Robert Spaemann, „Gezeugt, nicht gemacht. Die verbrauchende Embryonenforschung ist ein Anschlag auf die Menschenwürde", in: Christian Geyer (ed.), *Biopolitik. Die Positionen*. Frankfurt a. M. 2001, 41-50, here 41.

[10] Cf. Hans Jonas, *Technik, Medizin und Ethik. Zur Praxis des Prinzips Verantwortung*. Frankfurt a. M. 1987, 164.

[11] Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur. Auf dem Weg zu einer liberalen Eugenik?* Frankfurt a. M. 2001, 70 ff.

The anthropological notion of life-world, which currently inheres in most uses of the concept following Husserl and Habermas, is problematic in that the impetus to produce meaning is aimed at the *whole person*. The production of life-world meaning promises an act of appropriation in the form of a decontextualization and recontextualization of uncontrolled technological progress, of "globalization," of changes in the knowledge society, etc.—in short, a *human* interpretation of seemingly downright *inhuman* events. This promise is problematic not because it is not or cannot be kept, but because it fixes a perspective that is located, as it were, in the desert (of instrumental rationality and its discrete, isolated findings)—with a fata morgana (of the truly human) in front of it.

A key motive for reclaiming an anthropological standpoint in philosophy is the hope of reconciling two apparently divergent developments: on the one hand, the threatening disintegration of humanity's understanding of itself in light of the new biotechnologies, and, on the other, the conception of man as a moral being. The development of bioethics seems to satisfy this demand for reconciliation, as it allows for a responsible—that is, morally justified—way of dealing with innovations in medical technology and other related fields. The need for anthropology raised in the context of ethics poses difficulties not only because discussions about nature and naturalness are loaded with normative implications (with the underlying assumption that "the gap between is and ought […] can never truly be bridged"[12]), but mainly because the actual problem does not even lie in the theoretical distinction between description and evaluation and their de facto confusion. Rigid positions in moral philosophy and anthropology in fact maintain subliminal connections to each other, insofar as the "pure character," to speak with Kant, is represented by an empirical character placed at the very top of the hierarchical scale of values. In other words, the essentialist disposition of anthropology asserts itself precisely in its naturalistic descriptions, whose temporal and spatial representation it effectively makes possible in the first place. Anthropological and bioethical thought complement each other in such an optimal way because ethical evaluations can be countered with anthropological accounts. It is thus most necessary to construct a philosophical alternative that avoids the described ambiguities of the nature-man discourse by conceiving of this discourse in a fundamentally different way. In my view, this alternative (of a different kind of life-world philosophy) is to be found in pragmatism, especially of the kind developed by Dewey. If this pragmatism is to be understood in a *radical* sense, we can content ourselves neither with contemporary (analytical-post-analytical) neo-pragmatism nor with the understanding of pragmatism to be found in critical theory. Forward-looking is rather the pragmatist ethos described above, which "turns toward concreteness […], towards facts, towards action, and towards power" without metaphysical background assumptions.[13]

Translated by Millay Hyatt

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[12] Cf. Dieter Birnbacher, *Bioethik zwischen Natur und Interesse*. Frankfurt a. M. 2006, 150.
[13] Cf. William James, *Pragmatism* (1898). Courier Dove Publications, 1995, 20.