

The Basic Question of Philosophical Anthropology

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Abstract: *The article explores the question of the relation between the physical finite (existential) and spiritual infinite (essential) dimensions of the human being as the basic question of philosophical anthropology, which is analogous to the basic question of philosophy offered by F. Engels. The author claims that the question in terms of being – “which is prior?” – divides all philosophers into speculative (primacy of the infinite) and anti-speculative (primacy of the finite) thinkers. In terms of methodology the question divides them into the rationalists and irrationalists. The author comes to the conclusion that there have been four anthropological approaches – rationalistic anti-speculative, irrationalistic anti-speculative, rationalistic speculative, and irrationalistic speculative. Besides, each of them implies a particular view on the phenomenon of human spirit understood as fictitious, individual, collective, and universal, respectively. The article reviews all of them and states that they are limited due to the underlying particular methodological and worldview intentions. Hence, Kant’s question “what is the human being?” is left unanswered.*

Keywords: *human being, anthropology, basic question, spirit, existence, human essence.*

I. INTRODUCTION

G.V.F. Hegel was probably the first to definitely declare that any philosophy, before developing its content, must initially decide on the relation between matter and consciousness, nature and spirit. Later L. Feuerbach, proceeding from the primacy of anthropological problems and formulating the basic question of philosophy as the question about the human being [1], treats the body and soul correlation as the basic question. This question can be called the main anthropological problem, and its solution splits philosophers into two camps. But in view of the increasing specification and differentiation of philosophical views, «the great basic question of all philosophy, especially of more recent philosophy...» [2] may not have a definite answer. For example, wherever the traditional opposition of the body and the soul is questioned [3], and the idea of spirit arising from corporeality is proposed, this question hangs in the air. In this regard, we don’t qualify it as “great”, but merely “basic”, since the majority of representatives of philosophical anthropology may well be typologized depending on the answer to it. And due to the terminological variety (soul, consciousness, thinking, spirit / body, nature, existence, matter), we consider this question as the relation between the finite and the infinite in man.

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II. METHODS

According to the methodology of multidimensional analysis, we use the classification method in relation to many different philosophies in the field of philosophical anthropology. Classification is carried out in the lines of rationalism / irrationalism and speculativeness / anti-speculativeness. Thus, there are four classes of doctrines: rationalistic speculative, rationalistic anti-speculative, irrationalistic speculative, irrationalistic anti-speculative. At the same time, we deliberately limit the study of anthropological teachings to the period from the second part of the 19th century up to now. Anthropology is known to have developed into an independent science in the mid-19th century, and is, as R. Schacht says, “a main interest and focus of post-Hegelian philosophers” [4], and the data of anthropogenesis, morphology, human ethnology, discoveries of psychoanalysis served as an empirical basis for philosophical generalizations and the creation of philosophical anthropology in the early 20th century. It’s no wonder M. Heidegger pointed out that no other time had such diverse knowledge about man as ours [5].

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The rationalistic and irrationalistic tendencies that have accompanied the study of many philosophical problems from the ancient time are represented in this field as well. The first of them, in its turn, has divided into those who follow the speculative methodology of German idealism and those who opposed themselves to speculation. Dialectical and historical materialism with the primacy of social being over the individual formed the first line. It is symbolic that for the most part K. Marx’s anthropology remained unclaimed; it is limited to the theory of alienation from the perspective of the so-called “young” K. Marx, although half a century ago Allen W. Wood marked that “the tendency, in fact, has been to attribute central importance to Marx’s early thought [6]. The works of Karl Marx are full of all sorts of anthropomorphic terminology, he analyzes the nature of human beings, the mechanisms and forms of human activity as those of a suffering creature, but this study merely emphasizes the dominance of Marx’s social, economic and political works. Later, Marxism addressed the phenomenon of a particular human being, but due to the ideological struggle against capitalist values, which was distinctive of those who adhered to it: M. Adler started from Kantian ethics, E. Bloch and A. Schaff set off from existentialism, G. Marcuse and E. Fromm – from psychoanalysis. Bloch put the Utopian premise of Marxism at the forefront and sought to actualize its



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humanistic potential, although the mechanism for the implementation of the ideals of the “man of hope” remained unclear. A. Schaff analyzed a threat of human alienation in socialism and considered moral perfection as a way of overcoming. G. Marcuse criticizes capitalist society for its repressive attitude towards man, though the release of sexual instincts and the fight against “repressive” culture marginalizes the opposed minority: “radical change depends on a mass basis, but every step in the struggle for radical change isolates the opposition from the masses and provokes intensified repression” [7].

The advantage of this line is the emphasis on the historicity of man, understanding of human essence as a product of development. However, the finite is considered mainly in the material and production aspect: man is an active being that is involved in labor relations, and the infinite is social consciousness that determines individual consciousness, though it does not exist apart from it.

Those who openly opposed themselves to speculative methodology belong to another camp, and L. Feuerbach was the first who sought to view a person as a particular, finite being, which spotlighted his empirical, natural component: “all our ideas come from sensations, and in this respect empiricism is absolutely right ...” [8]. This idea of basing on empirical data transformed in the direction of natural science ideals and psychoanalysis, and is manifested in different philosophical directions. To a lesser extent it is characteristic of phenomenology (H. Plesner’s anthropology and his a priori organic theory; B. Waldenfels’s interpretation of physicality as the basic phenomenon that participates in the constitution of other phenomena of human existence), but to a greater extent – of A. Gehlen who attached particular importance to the biological aspect of human life and O. Marquard and his compensation theory focused on the replacement of the defects of human’s biological organization. This trend to limit man to his finite component in an even more aggressive and less sentimental form has been pursued by positivism, although it hasn’t developed an integral anthropological doctrine. In any case, the anthropological line of positivism (initially not quite clear since O. Comte treated anthropology as sociology), following the methodology of the exact sciences, has been biological-naturalistic starting from J.S. Mill and G. Spencer. Positivism which rejected the metaphysics of spirit and supported the idea of the finite dimension of human being evolved into statistics, empirical observations and measurement of mental rates (G.T. Fechner). Therefore, according to logical positivism, the problem of the relation between the spiritual and the physical is recognized as a pseudo-problem, and in post-positivism it comes down to radical physicalism. In this regard, I.I. Yevlampiev claims: “Positivism recognizes the primacy of the individual and the particular, but it is not able to justify the “superiority” of human existence in relation to that of a particular thing” [9]. A similar purely naturalistic interpretation of the finite and the infinite correlation resulted in various psychoanalytic conceptions: the human being from the positivist’s point of view is primarily his instincts, which is pointed out by P.S. Gurevich [10-17], and “deepening” into the sphere of the unconscious gives way to various interpretations of a person’s spiritual life through the unconscious mental processes, be they sexual energy (Z. Freud), inferiority complex (A. Adler) or the collective archetypical unconscious (K.-G. Jung). We refer

psychoanalysis to this camp for its adherence to exact (which is not doubtless – we can mention K. Popper’s criticism) methods of mental states study that fund clinical experience on “free associations”, and that was a matter of pride for S. Freud.

Analytic philosophy and pragmatism also solve the problem of the relation between the finite and the infinite through reduction to finiteness, and they are in the mainstream of positivism. Analytic philosophy theories are represented predominantly by various types of physicalism, whether in the “soft” form of logical behaviorism, which reduces mentality to bodily behavior (G. Ryle, L. Wittgenstein), or in the radical form of eliminativism (S. Blackmore, D. Dannet) and functionalism (L. Armstrong), except for the substantial dualism of consciousness of R. Swinburn and J. Foster. Anthropological pragmatism represented by William James, F. Schiller, R. Rorty pertains to naturalism when it defends the active nature of man and relativizes the results of his activity: the world is chaotic, and man gives it form and order.

The advantage of this line is the intention to define the human being out of his nature, the intention to spotlight the biological mechanisms, natural factors that determine human life, but its lack is the denial of the qualitative specificity of consciousness. The finite is viewed primarily from the standpoint of physiology, instincts, psychophysical patterns; the infinite is regarded as merely reason that is elementarily characteristic of other beings; there is no place for spirit here. On the one hand, dialectical and historical materialism develops the speculative tradition and focuses on social processes, but neglects the individual, on the other, psychoanalysis, positivism and other directions explore the human being, but they reduce him to an empirically observable particular phenomenon and deny the qualitative specificity of the non-individual component.

The irrationalistic tendency seeks to fill the niches formed in the rationalistic line: it places the problems of the human being above the problems of public life, and it outreaches human’s empirical limits. Some of the irrationalists believed that the study of the nature of man should be conducted without any speculative context. This line began with A. Schopenhauer and F. Nietzsche’s philosophies who restored the finiteness of an individual but abstractly opposed it to the infinite. Some thinkers conceived it as the opposition of the vital and the spiritual, regarding the spiritual component as the basis of his historical degradation and, as a result, humanity as a dead end of evolution (T. Lessing and L. Klages). Others conceived this rift between the finite and the infinite through the relation between existence and divine essence (religious existentialism of K. Jaspers, M. Unamuno, H. Aranguren). Also, J.-P. Sartre, A. Camus, H. Ortega-y-Gasset considered it as alienation of human individuality from its social environment; the leitmotif of this line is the idea of isolation of the human being from his true being and experiencing “the discord between the world and consciousness” [11-14]. All of these teachings viewed the rift between the finite and the infinite as an existential drama since they attached special value to a particular man.

This interpretation of the opposition between the finite and the infinite leads to the idea of human nothingness.



The abstracted, isolated position of an individual provokes his self-determination which we regard as an advantage of this line, whereas its disadvantage is abstraction from human history. The finite is viewed primarily as personal being thrown into the world; alienated from the infinite, it actualizes its own immanent infinity for “personal use” and generates its own arbitrary significance. This kind of conditional infinity can take various forms – love (G. Marcel), play (O. Finck), cult of the Other (E. Levinas), happiness (H. Marias), etc. But in general, it is the will to accept the finiteness of one’s existence and to assume responsibility for one’s own self. This line acknowledges the spirit of the individual that is born in determination to accept the initial status quo and dispose of oneself at one’s own discretion.

The other kind of irrationalism tried to keep the speculative heat, but its interpretation implied contemplation of the absolute identity a la F.W. Schelling who can be considered the progenitor of this line in modern philosophy. Its representatives aimed at reuniting the infinite world mind and the finite human being, which developed in European spiritualist doctrines — religious (Russian symbolic personalism, European intuitivism), non-religious (anthroposophical teachings) or even anti-religious (N. Hartman). In any case, absolute indiscernible identification of the finite and the infinite on the basis of the mystical tradition of European philosophy deprived spiritualism of the virtues of classical metaphysics that postulated dialectically differentiated identity and relied on reason. Russian religious philosophy focused on the idea of the God-man as the identity of individuality and universality in the process of purification from evil on the way to salvation; it is primarily characteristic of V.S. Solovyev whose ideas was adopted by N.A. Berdyaev, S.N. Bulgakov, E.N. Trubetskoy, etc.

Anthroposophy relies on personal practice as an individual microcosmic path to all-cosmic infinity in the act of "elevation of the individual spirit to the supernatural one" [12-16]. However, the unity of the finite and the infinite is regained in meditative self-deepening which activates imagination, inspiration and intuition.

The advantage of this direction, in our opinion, is the unity of the finite and the infinite, and the disadvantage is one-sided immediacy of the experience of mind that results in esotericity, arbitrariness, inadequacy to discursive thinking. The finite is primarily represented by a particular person, and the infinite - by the universal mind, god, etc. The spirit is the self-existent spirit of the absolute, and the finite mind (its modus) seeks to unite with it.

IV. SUMMARY

Thus, all four anthropological directions in the history of late Modern and contemporary European philosophy can be schematically depicted through the relation between the finite and the infinite: Marxism reduces the finite to the infinite; psychoanalysis and positivism reduce the infinite to the finite; existentialism opposes the finite and the infinite; spiritualism and anthroposophy identify the finite and the infinite. In addition, we can see a logical sequence in terms of recognition of the value of the spirit: psychoanalysis denies the spirit, existentialism emphasizes the individual spirit, Marxism emphasizes the collective social spirit that dominates the individual one, and anthroposophy emphasizes the world universal spirit.

V. CONCLUSION

Regardless of the paths of anthropological research, we must point to their one-sidedness and fragmentation in the matter of identification of the human being. Dialectic teaches there is no truth in abstract extremities. If it is so, revival of the question about the essence of the human being implies consideration of the merits of all four approaches and avoidance of extremes in the matter of the relation between the finite and the infinite, which might lead to reconciliation of the four traditions.

In this regard, we propose that the human being has a purely natural origin (psychoanalysis / positivism), which is enough to provoke existential dread and to accept it as a challenge. It leads to creation of the human world that contributes to transferring one’s own essence into a certain chosen activity (existentialism). At the same time, through a contribution to the world his activity turns to be socially and historically significant (Marxism). In the socio-historical activity the human being finds his proper place in the cosmos and leads his life in accordance with the world, and the collective consciousness is thereby transforms into the universal one (anthroposophy). Hence, the key question of philosophical anthropology about the essence of human nature [13-15] may possibly be answered from the perspective of all these approaches.

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