

## REGARDING WHAT IS HUMAN

*Talk by Silo in a study group in Tortuguitas, Buenos Aires, Argentina, May 1, 1983*

To have an understanding of the human phenomenon in general is one thing, while one's own specific register of the humanity of the other is something quite different.

Let's consider the first question; that is, the understanding the human phenomenon in general.

If one says that what is most characteristic of the human being is sociability, or language, or the transmission of experience, one still has not fully defined the human being because we find all of these expressed within the animal world as well, if only in some elementary state of development. We can observe chemical recognition and consequent attractions or rejections in organisms of the hive, the school, or the pack. There are host, parasitic, and symbiotic forms of organisation in which we can recognise elementary patterns of what we later see in more elaborate form in human groups. We also find a kind of animal "morality" with social punishment for transgressors, even when those behaviours viewed from outside might be interpreted on the basis of the instinct of preservation of the species, or as a complex of conditioned and unconditioned reflexes. Rudimentary technology is also not unknown in the animal world, nor are the emotions of affection, hostility, grief, and solidarity, whether among members of a group, or between groups, or between species.

Well then, what is it that defines what is human as such if not the reflection of the socio-historical as personal memory? Every animal is always the first animal, while every human being is his or her historical and social environment along with reflection on and contribution to the transformation or inertia of that environment. For an animal the environment is the natural environment. For the human being the environment is the historical and social environment, the transformation of that environment, and certainly the adaptation of nature to both immediate and longer-term needs. When compared with the systems of ideation, behaviour, and life of the animal world the human being's deferred response to immediate stimuli — the meaning and direction of human labour with respect to a future that is planned (or imagined) — presents us with a new characteristic. The broadening of the temporal horizon of human consciousness allows it to put off responses to stimuli, locating such phenomena in a complex mental space configured for the placement of deliberations, comparisons, and conclusions that lie outside the field of immediate perception.

In other words: In the human being there is no human "nature" unless this "nature" is considered a capacity, distinct from that of other animals, to move among various times that are outside the horizon of perception. Putting it in yet another way: If there is something "natural" in the human being it is not in the mineral, vegetable, or animal sense, but rather in the sense that what is natural in the human being is change, history, transformation.

It is difficult to adequately reconcile the idea of change with the idea of "nature," and therefore we prefer not to use the word nature as it has been used in the past. This term that has been so often used to justify all sorts of treachery toward the human being. For example, simply because the original inhabitants of a particular place appeared different from their foreign conquerors, these inhabitants were called aboriginals or "natives." Because other races presented different morphologies or colorations they were ascribed different "natures" within the human species, and so on. Thus, there was a "natural" order, and changing that order was a sin against all that was eternally established. Different races, different sexes, different social positions — all were fixed within a supposedly natural order that was to be conserved for all time.

The idea of "human nature," that had served an order of natural production broke down in the period of industrial transformation. Yet even today we still see vestiges of the zoological ideology of human nature — in the field of psychology, for example, in which people still talk about certain natural faculties such as the

“will” and similar things. Natural law, the State as part of a projected human nature, and other such notions have not contributed to progress but only to historical inertia and the negation of transformation.

If co-presence in human consciousness functions because of its enormous temporal broadening, and if the intentionality of human consciousness allows it to project a meaning, then what is most characteristic of the human being is being and making the meaning of the world. As it is said in *Humanise the Earth*:

*“Namer of a thousand names, maker of meanings, transformer of the world, your parents and the parents of your parents continue in you. You are not a fallen star but a brilliant arrow flying toward the heavens. You are the meaning of the world, and when you clarify your meaning you illuminate the earth. When you lose your meaning, the earth becomes darkened and the abyss opens.*

*“I will tell you the meaning of your life here: It is to humanise the earth. And what does it mean to humanise the earth? It is to surpass pain and suffering; it is to learn without limits; it is to love the reality you build.”*

We stand, then, at a great distance from the idea of human nature; in fact, at its polar opposite. What I mean is that if an imposed, supposedly permanent order, a “nature,” has ended up suffocating that which is human, now we are saying the contrary: What is natural must be humanised, and this humanisation of the world makes humankind a creator of meaning, direction, and transformation. And if that meaning liberates us from the supposedly “natural” conditions of pain and suffering, then what is truly human is what goes beyond the natural — it is your project, your future; it is your child, it is your dawn; it is your breeze and your storm, it is your anger and your caress; it is your fear and trembling for a future, for a new human being free from pain and suffering.

Let’s now consider the second question: one’s own register of the humanity of others.

Insofar as one registers the presence of another person as “natural,” then they will be no more than an object-like, or perhaps animal, presence. Insofar as one is anaesthetised against perceiving the temporal horizon of the other, they will have no meaning beyond a “for-me.” The nature of the other person will be a “for-me.” But when I constitute the other person as a “for-me,” I constitute and alienate myself in my own “for-myself.” I say, “I am for-me,” and in saying that I close my horizon of transformation. People who turn others into “things,” turn themselves into things, too, thereby closing off their own horizon.

Insofar as I do not experience the other except as a “for-me,” my vital activity will not humanise the world. The other must be an inner register for me, a warm sensation of an open future that does not end in the objectifying non-meaning of death.

To feel that which is human in the other is to feel the life of the other in a beautiful multi-coloured rainbow that grows farther and farther away the more I try to stop, to seize, to capture its expression. You grow farther away, and I take comfort if I have helped you to break your chains, to overcome your pain and suffering. And if you accompany me it is because in a free act you constitute yourself as a human being, and not simply because you were born “human.” I sense in you the liberty and the possibility of your constituting yourself as a human being, and in you my acts find the liberty at which they are aimed. And so, not even your death can halt the actions you set in motion, because you are in essence time and liberty. What I love in the human being, then, is their growing humanisation. And in these times of crisis, objectification, and dehumanisation, I love the possibility of the human being’s future vindication.