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Von Wright's philosophical humanism

Among the different topics that have marked the intersection of analytical thinking and other philosophical perspectives, such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, and pragmatism, "the study of man" is perhaps among those that have been less explored. With this expression, I intend to refer to that field of research crossing the whole Twentieth Century which aims at answering to contemporary challenges through the redefinition of the place of the modern man and of his relationships to the social and natural world. If we consider the strenuous interest of Husserl and his followers to the problem of intersubjectivity and of the life-world, the methodical reformulation of interpretation and of communicative processes in the hermeneutical tradition, the primacy of linguistic games in Wittgenstein's conception of *Weltbild* and, not lastly, Dewey's conception of a naturalistic humanism, we can easily identify in these different assumptions a shared philosophical intuition: that of a new humanism. Georg Henrik von Wright is one of the thinkers that have pursued with the greatest strength the task of joining together western philosophy and science in order to think anew the role and identity of the contemporary man. For this reason, he can be considered to be one of the last and most rigorous 'humanists'.

In the "Intellectual Autobiography", written in 1973 for the volume dedicated to him in the *Library of Living Philosophers*, von Wright had indicated the "search for a new humanist attitude" as the characteristic of the mature phase of his thought.¹ Seven years after, in the "Postscript 1980" to the "Autobiography" he came back on this subject to emphasise the presence in his research of an unresolved tension between the logical and epistemological intent behind his writings, on the one hand, and his "craving for a more 'visionary' grasp of the totality of human existence", on the other. It is to the search for a *Weltanschauung* able to fill the gap within the "double soul" of his philosophy and to bring together the various elements that dwelt therein, that von Wright seems to tie the emergence of topics such as the man-nature relationship, the future of Western civilization, and the problems of scientific and technological progress; these issues, in fact, have appeared more and more frequently in his work over the past two decades.

Over the twenty years that have passed from the "Postscript" until his recent volume, *In the Shadow of Descartes: Essays in the Philosophy of Mind*,² von Wright's philosophical activity has, indeed, interwoven multiple directions of research, which have helped to create new links and to clarify the articulation of essential points of reference. But of more interest, perhaps, than an identification of the individual aspects of von Wright's research would be a search for the unitary ground, if it exists, that connects them. This could, in fact, be the same ground that lies at the basis of his conception of natural determinism and human acting, which had, even earlier, informed his attempts to identify the connections and differences between acting and causation, between time and truth. It could concern the "humanization of nature" which inspires, in his more recent work, the critique of the

¹ Schilpp and Hahn (1989), p. 41.

² Von Wright (1998).

misconceptions within the traditional dualisms of man-nature, freedom-necessity, good-evil, values-facts, and mind-body, as well as his reformulation of the problem regarding man's place in nature and the relationship between the human and the natural sciences.

In connection with the problems of temporality and determinism, von Wright published around the middle of the Seventies writings on the theme of "humanism," the importance of which he himself mentions in "Postscript 1980". In reality, this interest in what he called the "neo-humanistic attitude" is anything but new in von Wright's thought. In the Sixties his writings with a specific analytical commitment intersect with essays on humanistic problems. For example, some works published in 1963 like *The Varieties of Goodness, Norm and Action, The Logic of Preference* find their counterparts in essays like "The Tree of Knowledge" (1960), which will give the title to a later collection of papers (1993), and "Essay om naturen, människan och den vetenskapligt-tekniska revolutionen" (1963), which anticipate in many ways his reflections in the decades that followed.

Running throughout von Wright's entire itinerary is the philosophical practice that is shaped, not only by the problems and methods of logic and of philosophical analysis, but also by the "study of man", and that pays heed to the themes which, from the pre-Socratics to Nietzsche, have oriented philosophy toward the search for a "Weltanschauung" and a "Sinn des Lebens." He himself has also recently acknowledged the "double track" of his research and, in the brief but illuminating "Introduction" to *The Tree of Knowledge*, attributes its existence, in large part, to the influence exercised on him by the personalities of his two masters: Eino Kaila and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

In a page of the "Replies" included in Schilpp's volume, von Wright lists all of four phases in his investigation of humanism: the *first* youthful phase of aesthetic humanism, the *second* ethical phase of the Forties and Fifties, the *third* rationalist one of the Sixties, and the *fourth* social-humanist phase, which extends up to the mid-Seventies. The writings of those years reflect his reawakened interest in Hegel's and Marx's thought and the problems of the social and political *Weltbild*. Moreover, one can reasonably assume that the 1976 essay mentioned in the "Postscript": "What is Humanism?" opens a *fifth* phase in his studies on humanism. But in what way is this phase "new" in the context of von Wright's production over the last two decades? In his writings from 1976-1977 up to the essays collected in *The Tree of Knowledge* and beyond,³ it is clear that the "two tracks" of his research, while taking shape in ways of philosophizing that are distinct for their style and content, nonetheless present an affinity of conceptions and intents. Von Wright establishes a link, which had not been made explicitly in his previous writings, between his theses about free action and the problems of humanism. It could, perhaps, be said that, in the more recent "humanistic" essays, the problematic nucleus that had remained in the background of the "analytical" essays is laid bare and comes into the limelight.

The special relevance of the fourth social-humanist phase of von Wright's search for a humanist attitude could be identified in the revision of his previous rationalist conception, according to which the science of man must be modeled on the exact sciences of nature and integrated into a more comprehensive, unitary science.⁴ This revision will be carried to its conclusion in *Explanation and Understanding* (1971), where his dualistic vision of the study of man and of nature will develop a vision that von Wright considers very close to what he calls the "Aristotelian" tradition and opposed to the monistic and scientific

³ The main writings to which we are referring, directly or indirectly, in our reconstruction of von Wright's philosophical humanism are the following: von Wright (1960), (1979), (1987), (1989), (1990), (1991), (1997).

⁴ See on this topic the illuminating essay by Tranøy (1974).

positions which have kept alive up to our days the “Galilean” tradition.⁵ Nevertheless, in his writings on humanism in the past two decades, a perspective emerges which further corrects the point of view of *Explanation and Understanding*. Instead of the heritage of the Aristotelian tradition, there one can easily recognise the reflection of a new source of inspiration, precisely that of the “Kantian” tradition which we have seen underpinning von Wright’s most recent investigations into man’s place in nature, between the intelligible world of causal laws and the noumenal world of the ideals of reason. Significant traces of this inspiration are present in many works of the period, particularly in one of the more important and articulated essays of von Wright’s production: *Of Human Freedom* (1985). It is, perhaps, in the agreement with the special form of compatibility between natural necessity and free will, between causality and freedom, which Kant recognised when he considered the condition of man as a “citizen of two worlds,” that one can catch sight of the link that sums up von Wright’s way to escape from the “deterministic illusion,” on one hand, and from the “dream” of what he calls the “restoration” of a world that had seemed lost and of a human condition that had been fatally compromised by cognitive *hybris*.⁶

In contrast with the prevalent version of compatibilism, *i.e.* with its meaning as peaceful coexistence, as stability in principle, almost as mutual indifference, von Wright’s indicates with this name a relation that is anything but stable, anything but painless, perhaps a search for a balance that has always been sought and never achieved. The fact that human action is both free and determined is itself already a sign of its radical doubleness, of the instability and dramatic nature intrinsic to the condition of man in the world. Therefore his interpretation of the “dream” to escape from the dualism of freedom and determinism is, at heart, not so much with the view of “solving” it, in keeping with the style of problem-solving typical of the theoretical procedures of science, as it is to “dissolve” the illusion that pervades European culture in its most meaningful expressions – Greek and Judeo-Christian – that it is possible to treat the ideals of the reason with the categories of the intellect, and the problems of metaphysics with the tools of science. In effect the way out from the dualism of freedom and determinism is the central problem in the Tanner Lectures entitled *Of Human Freedom*, where it is “resolved” by showing that the irreconcilability traditionally accorded to these concepts is, in effect, a “pseudo-conflict.” The notion of determinism in the framework of actions for reasons cannot be confused with the notion of universal determinism used in the framework of the natural sciences. As Kant said, the liberty of the practical use of reason and submission to natural laws are not contradictory and therefore not incompatible. The clarification suggested by this distinction, which von Wright proposes as a “solution,” is, in reality, not a new “theory” that defends, with new arguments, the reconcilability of determinism and free will; rather, he is showing how the “problem” of that reconciliation, once the differences are made clear, simply disappears, and the “solution” to the problem is precisely this.

Von Wright’s philosophical neo-humanism consists precisely in showing the unrealisability – the “dream” indeed – of fusing the varied forms of human rationality, of crystallising them within a single and conclusive theoretical schema, which assumes the model of scientific knowledge as its paradigm. According to von Wright, the monistic tendencies present in the great traditions of the past survive in the positivistic and neo-positivistic programs of a unitary science, of the unification of the theories and methods of the natural and human sciences, and, above all, in the intellectual orientation of today’s scientific and technological revolution. This tendency aims to obscure the multiple forms in

⁵ Von Wright (1971), chapter I.

⁶ Von Wright (1990), pp. 196-97.

which the human condition is expressed, and it “provides a quasi theoretical justification for manipulations of society by individuals and groups who are in a position to ‘engineer’ or ‘steer’ the social process.”⁷ Once the impracticability of the monistic expectation has been made clear and the illusion that lies at its base has been unmasked, the problem of avoiding the contradictions between nature and reason, between causality and freedom, reappears under a new form, not that of their mutual reduction or identification, but of “a more articulate schema of understanding”⁸ which “dissolves,” that is, makes meaningless any form of dualism, as well as any form of reductionism. The concepts involved in the old dualism do not refer to substances which can be reduced or identified: their meaning is, as we know, determined by the contexts in which they are used, by their reference to the symbolic challenges (institutions, rules, and norms) to which they respond.

In the 1960 essay “The Tree of Knowledge,” which anticipates by about twenty years his more mature formulations on philosophical humanism, von Wright had manifested his first doubts about the optimistic belief in a positive outcome for the transformations in the style of human life stemming from scientific-technological progress and from the age-old search for a hegemonic form of rationality. Precisely because of the emblematic significance enjoyed by the biblical myth referring to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in representing the destiny of man when dominated by cognitive *hybris*, von Wright included this essay in the volume published in 1993 under the same title. In the two parts that constitute the book, he collected his autobiographical and historical-critical contributions to the formulation of the great themes of philosophical logic and analytical philosophy, as well as his considerations about the condition and the destiny of man in the modern age. Far from taking the form of a kind of “theory of culture,” these considerations express, instead, his attempt to offer a “diagnosis of our time,” the result of which is to bring to light those tendencies that, asserted throughout the course of Western culture, have proposed an illusory rationalisation of the relation between science and reason, between man and nature, and have given credit to the prevalence of forces whose aim is the dehumanization and self-annihilation of man and of his environment.

According to von Wright, the dangers deriving from the loss of identity of man, of his dehumanization are exemplified by the classical myths that narrate the expulsion from Eden, the punishment of Prometheus, and the damnation of Faust, are re-proposed, in one of von Wright’s most charming essays, in his reference to Dante’s invention of the final voyage of Ulysses and his shipwreck at the forbidden boundaries of the world.⁹ What is the significance of the mythological stories from a philosophical point of view? First of all, they show the doubleness of human rationality and, hence, its intrinsically tragic nature: that is, that knowledge can, at the same time, be an instrument of good and of evil, of emancipation and of damnation. In the conclusion to “The Tree of Knowledge” von Wright states that the three myths

are all tragic, either in the sense – as in the Paradise myth and in the Faust saga – that they show us man torn between the two poles of light and darkness, or in the sense – as in the Prometheus myth – that they depict a struggle of man for a fundamentally just cause, but blinded by self-overconsideration. (p. 153).

⁷ Schilpp and Hahn (1989), pp. 843-44.

⁸ Von Wright (1980), Preface.

⁹ See von Wright (1990) and also my Introduction in Egidi (1999).

The *leitmotiv* common to the three myths consists precisely in the double potential for good and evil intrinsic in the desire for knowledge that pervades human reason. In the biblical story, as in the myth of Prometheus and in the saga of Faust, von Wright sees a prefiguration of the human condition which he had so significantly expressed in "Determinism and the Study of Man" (1976) defining man as both a slave and the master of his own destiny, and his actions as intrinsically marked by the requirement of being both free and determined.

This basic doubleness cannot be eliminated without paying the price of progressive dehumanization, leading to self-destructive results: if man were not determined, he could not exercise his freedom; if he were not free, he could not act rationally. The risk to which the human condition is exposed, clenched between a desire for knowledge and the very limits of its nature, is obviously represented in the language of these myths: man in Eden, Prometheus, and Faust all share the human desire for knowledge, but, as their exemplary stories show, it can become a "lethal game" and, if turned into an absolute, can lead to sin, to damnation, and to death. Sin, damnation, and death are labels, or figures, for the destructive processes that man primes for firing when he tries to go beyond his nature, wishing to become omniscient and omnipotent, to be the equal of the gods in his sovereign power over the nature, to surpass the limits of his temporality by making the fleeting moment eternal. In this gallery of myths, von Wright gives a place no less important to Dante's Ulysses, who, "in pursuit of virtue and knowledge," finds death by overstepping the boundaries of the inhabited world.

By digging into the rich mythology of the biblical account and the tales of Prometheus, of Ulysses, and of Faust, and into the interpretations that philosophy, literature, and art have given them over the centuries, von Wright brings to light the profound similarities that the truths hidden in the language of myth have with "modern" expressions of the human desire for knowledge: science unbound from any form of authority (the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil), progress as the bearer of happiness (the gift of fire to man still in the wild state), the victory over time and death (the pact with the devil in exchange for one's soul) – these are all images, in turn poetic, philosophical, and religious, of the destiny that awaits a world and a society threatened by the absolutization of the proper values of technological civilization.¹⁰

Is the aspiration to knowledge, therefore, fatally destined to become tragedy? Do science and technology, born from the need to liberate and emancipate mankind, inevitably lead to a new form of slavery? In the face of the urgency of these questions, the classical myths lose their apparent, banal meaning of illustrating divine abuses with regard to man, the triumph of violence over justice, and assume the dimension of a severe warning: human reason, in the complex formed by its abilities and cognitive acquisitions, can contribute to making man freer, but also to making him more of a slave. Dante had pointed to salvation, in the form of the intervention of a higher grace, and the restoration of a lost equilibrium. For modern man, it is not possible to return to paradise lost; Dante's dream is over: "der Traum ist ausgeträumt," as Husserl would say. Nevertheless, it remains a regulating ideal: no power exists if not that of human reason itself to turn knowledge into an instrument of salvation rather than damnation:

There is no way back for us moderns either to Ancient belief in a self-preserving cosmic harmony or to Dante's dream of the restoration of a universal Christian commonwealth. We must try to attain our own self-reflective understanding of our situation. And I have

¹⁰ See von Wright (1989) and (1991).

wanted to say that it belongs to this achievement that we take warning of the fate which the poet foresaw for the non-Homeric Ulysses who steered his vessel beyond the pillars of Hercules and thereby entered the road to self-annihilation.¹¹

The “lesson” that von Wright seeks to draw from the warning implicit in the tales of the great myths is to conceive man’s place in nature from a perspective that we will call “humanistic,” with reference to a conception of the problem that harks back to the “Humanists” of the Renaissance, such as Pico della Mirandola, and reaches, I would say, up to Kant’s Copernican revolution. Contrary to Kepler’s later deterministic conceptions, Pico’s man, as he presented him in his 1486 work *Oratio de hominis dignitate*,

has no fixed place in the great order of things. It is up to man himself to choose his place, what he will be: beast or angel or something in between.¹²

Von Wright’s humanism can be seen in his conception of the dynamic relationship between man and the natural world, a relationship that, to a certain extent, incorporates his “very special” idea of compatibility formulated in *Of Human Freedom*.

¹¹ Von Wright (1990), pp. 200-1.

¹² Von Wright (1979), p. 4.

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