

Humanism and the Hermeneutic Limits of Rationality

[Paru in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 16 (1993), 417-432].

The problem of the limits of reason can be addressed in many different ways according to one's understanding of rationality and of what it is that it cannot comprehend. Perhaps the most common way of seeing these limits lies in the traditional opposition between reason and emotion. Conceived as a "cold" manner of arguing, reason would somehow be unable to grasp the true feelings that motivate the human heart. Let us call this problem that of the *emotive limits* of rationality (1). However, the limits of rationality may also be interpreted according to a "cosmological" perspective. In this regard, it is often believed that the project of rationality rests on the tacit expectation that reality is rational and thus open to scientific penetration. But what if the world is not rational? What if it resists all attempts to come to terms with it on a merely rational basis? The limits of rationality would thus lie in the profound chaotic or anarchic state of the universe. Let us call this understanding, which is characteristic of romanticism, that of the *anarchic limits* of rationality (2). There is also a more modest version of this anarchic sentiment which is to be found in the assumption that there are ultimately incomprehensible phenomena which reason cannot explain. These inexplicable happenings could surely be emotions (as in 1) or the chaotic substructure of the universe (2). However, what I am referring to here is simply the fact that rationality always leaves something unexplained and often inexplicable. A rational elucidation can never give a complete account of everything it is claiming. It must rely on hypotheses which go back themselves to other hypotheses and so on. Therefore, one cannot expect a thoroughly rational account of phenomena or one which could explain everything. This limit of rationality lies at the root of the unending process of explanation that is characteristic of modern science. Furthermore, even if the unexplained elements of a theory come to be elucidated by other theories, they will in turn have their own gray areas, and so forth *ad infinitum*. Let us call this understanding, which is characteristic of scientific explanation, the *explicative limits* of rationality (3). Beyond mere epistemological accounts, the limits of rationality can also be seen in a broader or sociological perspective.

The rise of rationality goes hand in hand with a world that is more and more secularized. The questions of meaning that were long answered by religion, myth and metaphysics are now left to rationality alone. Yet, this modern and instrumental variant of rationality, more often than not appears unable to satisfy them. As Max Weber has shown, this rational, secularized and disenchanting universe induces sociological pathologies: lack of orientation, no real explanation of the purpose of human life or action, dissolution of the sense of community and authority, etc. A rationally dominated world is one in which the belief in a higher purpose would no longer be possible; while undesired, meaninglessness and nihilism would be the unavoidable consequences of a rationalized universe. Let us call this understanding, which is characteristic of the modern predicament, the *sociological limits* of rationality (4). Yet, another dramatic way of understanding the limits of rationality is to claim that the age of rationality is over and that rationality is no longer the compelling force it used to be (e.g., as it was for the Enlightenment or the whole of Western civilization). The "end" of reason would therefore usher us into something like post-modernism, and while there are various conceptions of this end of reason, according to what is understood as reason, one can speak here of the *historical limits* of rationality (5).

In this essay, I will discuss the limits of rationality from a somewhat different perspective: the perspective of humanism and the way it is represented by contemporary hermeneutic theory (following in great part the lead of Hans-Georg Gadamer). Where do the limits of rationality lie for a humanist? Mostly in the exclusive domination of the rational mode of knowledge that is exemplified by the exact sciences. According to humanism, and with it hermeneutics, the natural-scientific mode of knowledge has been wrongly heralded as the sole model of knowledge and science. Furthermore, as a result of its universal imposition, the truth claim of the humanities has often been measured in light of criteria that belong to the rational-scientific model of the exact sciences. Humanism, and hermeneutics, would argue that this does not do justice to the truth experience that is witnessed by the humanities. The humanities should not understand their scientific relevance according to this alienating model in which they end up losing their vital specificity. Rather, they should understand their relevance according to the tradition of humanism,

where truth is more a matter of education, culture or "formation" than a matter of certainty controlled by the means of methodical science. Finally, given that the humanistic foundation of the humanities has to a large extent been forgotten in the self-understanding of the humanities, it is the ambition of hermeneutics to retrieve it.

Before we discuss the hermeneutic approach to humanism, it might be useful to clarify first what is to be understood by the rational model of knowledge that one might call *scientific* and, secondly, what is meant by humanism. It is only if we understand the limits of the rationality involved in this scientific view that we can fully appreciate the contribution of humanism as it has been reactivated by hermeneutics.

Even if there is still quite a lot of debate in post-Kuhnian philosophy of science about the meaning of a rational or scientific explanation, one can characterize its undeniable success by highlighting some of its less controversial and still dominant features. Let us stress from the outset that it is not our purpose to call into question the legitimacy or success of the scientific outlook. While there is no denying that humanity owes much to what modern science has brought about, there are crucial limits to this model in that it cannot be applied without qualifications to the realm of the human sciences (or, for that matter, to the field of politics and the social sciences) in which a more humanistic approach has to be rediscovered or reintroduced.

The success of the scientific approach resides primarily in its stress on method. Method is the objective instance which guarantees that the scientific results do not depend on the subjective prejudices of the observer. Method displays a step-by-step rigour which can be reproduced by any other observer, regardless of his or her standpoint. Therefore, it is by distancing the subject matter from the observer that method permits objectivity or a view of the object that does not depend on the subject. Through this distancing of the subject matter, in order to allow for objective verification, method aims at universality; and, unless there is an error in the methodology, its results are supposed to be valid for everyone. This is why most of the criticism that is practiced in the field of science is directed towards methodology. In this regard, one might refer to the trivial example of opinion polls that are dismissed because of their flawed "methodology". What is important for method is that

any independent observer can repeat the steps of scientific explanation in order to test the validity of the results. Mathematical formulas are a most convenient tool for such verification because they do not vary from one individual to the next. Beyond this appeal to mathematics, which often suffices to qualify truths as scientific, modern science also appeals to a critical and open discussion in which progress is achieved through falsification. A theory that excludes itself from such open criticism would cease to be scientific. As Karl Popper argued, a scientific theory has to put itself on the line by remaining open to outside refutation. There is much discussion on this controversial notion of refutation, which cannot occupy us here. If a theory itself is not susceptible of refutation, at least its empirical predictions must be. For instance, while the guiding hypotheses of the theory of relativity might never be confirmed, its predictions have to expose themselves to such testing.

A last feature of the scientific picture, one which is linked to its hypothetical nature, is its commitment to general laws or regularities. A particular event is explained scientifically when it is shown to be the occurrence of a more universal law of events. In other words, something is demonstrated to be the result of an overall regularity which is in principle open to objective corroboration. Therefore, a simple description of events, which is devoid of explanation, is not thought to be scientific. A scientific explanation takes place when the particular event is traced back to a general constant which can itself be referred back to a still higher law, for the greatest coherence of the theory that is defended.

In short, method, independence from the observer and his individual prejudices, objective verification and testing, the search for universal laws are constitutive of the scientific outlook which has imposed itself on our culture as the most reliable, if not the only model of knowledge. Now, what is humanism?

In a way, humanism and modern science have much in common. They were both developed in the Renaissance as means of emancipation from the tutelage of the Middle Ages and superstition. The search for objective, verifiable results based on observation is itself not foreign to the humanism that appeared in the Renaissance. In fact, the fathers of modern science, Copernicus, Galileo, Bacon, Descartes and even Gutenberg were great humanists. Yet, humanism espoused a view of knowledge that cannot be reduced to the scientific outlook

which has become so dominant in the last centuries that it threatens to exclude the humanistic perspective itself.

In its inception, humanism rests on a theological understanding of man's position in the universe. There are two sides to human nature: a humiliating and a more elevating one. The humiliating aspect of our condition is found in the biblical notion that man has been made out of ashes. Our origins are very modest indeed. Nonetheless, it is also said in the *Genesis* (and this is unsettling as it is enhancing) that man was made in the image of God (*imago dei*). Mankind thus carries in itself an image which begets it upon a higher destiny. One might note here that the modern notion of human dignity, that is so often called upon today in ethical debates, rests entirely on what was originally a theological qualification. If something is to be respected in human nature, it is not its dusty, terrestrial or animal side, which it shares with all other creatures, but the challenging notion that man was created as an *imago dei*. Because of this and only this, man enjoys a dignity in the realm of creation that calls for some respect. The Renaissance seized upon this notion of man's dignity when it celebrated the human achievements in the arts, science and culture as so many attempts to live up to this higher calling. This brought about a liberation in the understanding of human knowledge and artistry. Science did not exhaust itself in the study of divine things or in the *studia divinitatis*. There was also a genuine science of human affairs, a *studia humanitatis* that reaped fruit from the human accomplishments of the classics in literature, culture and science. For the Middle Ages (at least, according to the way in which they were resented by the Renaissance) the pursuit of human knowledge was thought to stem from a mere curiosity (*curiositas*)¹ which was condemned as being a conceited and infatuated attempt by man to understand the world out of his own resources, that is, without relying on the traditional or biblical account which both revealed all that man needed to know and was accompanied by a severe repudiation of merely human wisdom. The entire effort and achievement of the Renaissance was to protest against this depreciating view of human wisdom by extolling the possibilities of the notion of *imago dei*, that assimilated man's nature, and most prominently his "rational" nature, to divinity. There is thus a

¹. Compare the classical study of Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966), Cambridge/London: M.I.T. Press, 1983.

way in which mankind can develop its cognitive capacities without appearing to indulge in a presumptuous curiosity for its own sake. To let one's talents flourish is nothing other than the realization of man's higher calling as an image of God.

The early Renaissance was too dependent upon tradition to picture this self-elevation of man as something that could be achieved by the means of the autonomous human being (a possibility that, nevertheless, soon became a real temptation for Bacon and Descartes with their project of an entirely new beginning or *tabula rasa*). For humanism, which still heeded the admonition that man was made out of ashes and that his reason could be very presumptuous indeed, human culture needs models. These models were originally the classics, which were mostly found in antiquity and then the canon of works which modernity later developed on its own. Such classics are, so to speak, the privileged witnesses of man's experiences, and the ones that need to be studied if one wants to learn what it is to be truly human and to measure up to the ideal of man as an *imago dei*.

Furthermore, it is also important to note in this respect the concept of culture and education which the German classicists of the 18th century later called *Bildung* ("formation"). While *Bildung* means education, it also stresses the notion that education has to be achieved by a process of building, that is, by transforming what is originally an amorphous matter into an orderly structure. The word "culture" also retains this dimension if one recalls its agricultural origins. To cultivate the soil is to labour it or to prepare it for seeds that will let fruit blossom. For humanism, the true dignity of mankind does not reside in its actual state, but in the idea that it can be cultivated and elevated to its higher destiny by domesticating, as it were, its animal or earthly side. The very modern notion of an "unending process" and of the necessary development or unfolding of man's latent potential thus has theological origins. Gadamer will allude to these origins in his rediscovery of humanism at the beginning of *Truth and Method* (1960): "The rise of the word *Bildung* evokes the ancient mystical tradition according to which man carries in his soul the image of God, after whom he is fashioned, and which man must cultivate in himself."¹ What

¹. Hans-Georg Gadamer, WM, in GW I, 16 ("Der Aufstieg des Wortes Bildung erweckt vielmehr die alte mystische Tradition, wonach der Mensch das Bild Gottes, nach dem er geschaffen ist, in seiner Seele trägt und in sich aufzubauen hat."); TM, 11.

distinguishes mankind from the other creatures is precisely this capacity to develop itself and to surpass its provincial particularity by lifting itself up to the universal. Gadamer, relying on Hegel's later description of this human elevation above nature, also states: "Man is characterized by the break with the immediate and the natural that the intellectual, rational side of his nature demands of him."¹

Universality, as an aim of knowledge, is something one achieves by broadening one's horizons, by going beyond the particularity of our given nature and by learning from others who have bequeathed to us the wealth of their wisdom. This meaning of universality differs from the one we encountered in the scientific view. According to this conception, universality meant that a hypothesis is valid for all the occurrences of this or that general law. For humanism, universality resides rather in the unending task of overcoming one's particularity or situatedness; and it is important that it be understood as a task because it can never be achieved once and for all. Moreover humanism asserts that one never ceases to learn and to rise above one's own indigence through learning. Evidently, this model of knowledge is very different from the scientific outlook. Its purpose is to make us more human, not to yield mathematical laws. Yet, it is a genuine mode of knowledge and one which is attuned to our human condition and its need for self-improvement or culture. However, what does one have to learn in order to become a better human being? There is no clear-cut answer to this question. If we had one, we would be situated outside the human condition and would therefore be able to fall back on the scientific model of knowledge. So a humanistic formation has to constantly seek and rebuild its own culture by learning from tradition. For the early humanists, the only available models were those of the classics. Yet, while we have a great debt to them for rediscovering those forgotten models, it is unlikely that we can retain their normative notion of the ancients. But we can perhaps preserve something of their general notion of *formation* (i.e. the idea that education proceeds by learning first and foremost from the cultural achievements of humanity, the conquests of human reason that can be reaped from history, literature, art, philosophy, religion and all the human sciences). If

¹. WM, 17 ("Der Mensch ist durch den Bruch mit dem Unmittelbaren und Natürlichen gekennzeichnet, der durch die geistige, vernünftige Seite seines Wesens ihm zugemutet ist."); TM, 12.

one wishes to understand the "limits of rationality", it is important to note that through this humanistic "culture" (again in the agricultural sense of the word), we acquire a genuine *formation* and true knowledge. Yet, this is a truth that cannot be comprehended adequately under the scientific model sketched above and which limits knowledge to the observation of objective and mathematical regularities.

The scientific model aims at a detached notion of truth that does not relate to our human formation and concerns. What one makes out of a scientific truth is irrelevant to its validity as long as it can be confirmed by methodical and mathematical means. However, truth means something different in the human sciences. One can speak here of a formative truth and of meaningful truths that can help us become more human by helping us rise above our particularity. Is methodical verification really that important here? Is mathematical certainty sought after? Are general laws the main concern of humanistic knowledge?

Clearly, these concerns are not central to the human sciences. Yet, it is by applying such criteria that one has judged the scientificity of the human sciences; and under such criteria, the human sciences have fared very poorly. Indeed, compared to the "hard" or exact sciences, they appear to be nothing other than "soft". Instead of producing mathematical and verifiable results, they seem content to ponder questions which will never be resolved. In all these judgements, which are wide-spread in the general population, but also amongst the human and social scientists themselves, the prevalence of the scientific model remains unquestioned.

This is unfortunate since what is missed is the particular ideal of humanistic knowledge that has very little to do with the scientific picture; and this is true despite the fact that the two were born out of the same motivation, that is, as means of emancipation. As we saw earlier, the founders of modern science came from the cradle of humanism. To ground knowledge on mathematical certainty and observation meant a deliverance from the yoke of superstition and clericalism. This liberation stood in the service of the emancipation of man. Nonetheless, it is worth asking whether this motive has remained central in our scientific culture where the authority of exact science has staked an almost exclusive claim to the idea of knowledge and truth. It

could very well be that this scientific notion of truth, which rests on objective verification and mathematical method alone, has forced knowledge under yet another yoke which prevents other avenues of understanding from being explored.

In this context in which even the human sciences have tended to understand themselves in terms of the scientific definition of knowledge, (and, indeed, in a rather deficient fashion), the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer has tried to rediscover the humanistic dimension of the humanities. The human sciences, he contends, have to liberate themselves from the alienating methodology of the exact sciences and to understand themselves as "the true advocates or emissaries of humanism", *als die wahren Sachwalter des Humanismus*.¹

It might seem rather tautological to claim that the humanities have to see themselves as the defenders of humanism. Yet, if this tautology needs to be repeated today, it is because the human sciences have increasingly fallen under an anti-humanist spell. In fact, many scholars in the humanities actually pride themselves on being anti-humanists. One must pose the question therefore: How did this anti-humanism creep into the humanities? It seems certain that it stems from a protest against the view that man is at the center of the universe. Modernity has indeed developed a notion of the human subject that seems to put it at the center of things. For Descartes, all certainty must derive from the authority of the *cogito*, the thinking subject. For Kant, to act morally is to follow a command that emanates from our autonomous reason. Clearly, the notion of the autonomous and independent subject has been a leading force in modern culture and humanism itself, which has generally been understood as a self-liberation of man.

However, many discoveries in both the natural sciences and in the humanities, have dethroned the human subject from the privileged position bestowed upon it by modernity. Geneticists have revealed to what extent human behaviour depends on genetic codes, which one also finds in animals. Freudian theory has tried to establish that our conscious selves are creations of the libidinal realm of the unconscious to which psychoanalysis claims to have privileged access. In addition, Marxism has attempted to show that the

¹. H.-G. Gadamer, WM, 14; TM, 9 (which translates: "the true representatives of humanism").

consciousness of the individual was but a mere reflection of a class perspective. In other words, the real subject of history resides not in the individual but in class struggle. Similarly, structural linguistics has argued that language is not a creation or instrument of the human spirit. Rather, it is the other way around: What we are, or think we are, is a mere production of linguistic games that are alleged to be the truer, more fundamental "subjects". All these various "humiliations" of man's distinctiveness are well known and a host of others could be mentioned as well. If the human subject is more genetic code than autonomous subject, more unconsciousness than consciousness, more a member of a social class than an individual, more a function of language than its author, then it appears unwarranted to focus the humanities on the central position of mankind, which has been so undermined by recent insights of the hard and soft sciences.

This *Zeitgeist* or this spirit of the times accounts for the anti-humanistic bent of today's humanities. Even if these specific insights are valid in themselves, I believe that the anti-humanist perspective they seem to encourage is profoundly mistaken. For four main reasons: First of all, it rests on an ill-informed understanding of what humanism is all about. Secondly, it is itself, in a not so subtle way, a product of the scientific picture of knowledge. Thirdly, it can be shown to be an over-reaction to a form of existentialist humanism which was dominant at the beginning of the century. Finally, it wrongly claims that the humanistic conception of knowledge is ideological or elitist. In this regard, I will expand briefly on these points.

1. While it is often claimed that humanism rests on the reassuring view that man is at the center of the universe, humanism has never forgotten that man was made out of ashes.¹ If one can leave aside the theological context, one can claim for humanism the truism that man is but a grain of sand in the vast

¹. For an incisive critique of the notion that the earth's position at the center of the universe had any dignifying aspect for the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, compare R. Brague, "Le géocentrisme comme humiliation de l'homme", in *Herméneutique et ontologie*, Hommage à P. Aubenque, Paris: P.U.F., 1990, 203-223. By relying on an impressive and wide variety of texts, Brague comes to the convincing conclusion that man was more often than not viewed as a humble piece of "dirt" (we are prudishly avoiding another four-letter word which frequently appears in the medieval texts quoted by Brague) at the very bottom of universe. For the Middle Ages, the sheer quest for autonomous knowledge was a very presumptuous undertaking for such an undeserving being as man, that could only be saved through grace. The Renaissance introduced a new perspective by valorizing knowledge, but it was still grounded on the notion that man was at its base nothing but a piece of mud. It is only by building itself, in the humanist understanding of the word, that it could hope to achieve any kind of grandeur, yet one which is primarily reminiscent of its divine creator.

universe. This is by no means comforting. Yet, man can build himself, make something out of his situation, transcend his provincial particularity and elevate himself to a more universal perspective. Of course, mankind can still do this even if it is not at the center of the universe anymore. Classical humanism attributed this elevation to the notion of *imago dei*. Even if mankind carries this image within itself, it is by no means certain that it will realize what it means and what it calls for. Indeed, for many centuries, the humanists believed, mankind neglected to develop its creative talents, preferring the, yes, comforting yoke of tradition (what Immanuel Kant called "man's self-imposed minority"). Formation or *Bildung* is there to help us conquer the darker sides of our nature which threaten us at every instant. It is not very reassuring to constantly have to domesticate and cultivate oneself in order to avoid barbarism. Yet, this is the human predicament. This remains true even if one relinquishes the theological concept of the image of God (a notion, in fact, which is far less encouraging than it is humiliating because of man's constant failing to measure up to this ideal). So, the anti-humanism of today misunderstood humanism on a crucial point. Humanism never rested on the idea that man was at the center of things. Rather, as modern science has reminded us, the human subject stands at the receiving end of the cosmic order, of language and of its socio-historical community. A humanistic perspective is not therefore tied to an anthropocentric view of things. It is very demeaning for mankind to constantly have to be learning in order to conquer its darker instincts. Clearly, no idea of man's centeredness is to be found here. For humanism, the important point is the stress it places on the unending task of formation and education. In a way, it runs counter to the notion of man's central position in the universe. It is not therefore man's centeredness, but the promise of *Bildung* which is the key notion of humanism, a notion which is no less a requisite even in an anti-humanist context.

2. By abandoning the tradition of humanism from which they could have gained a more appropriate understanding of their specific truth claim, the human sciences expose themselves to the alienating methodology of the exact sciences which is not at all attuned to the humanistic mode of knowledge. Willingly or not, anti-humanism thus plays into the hands of the scientist model; indeed, one might add that it is perhaps nothing other than its by-

product. There is, in fact, a lot of reductive positivism in anti-humanism which is conspicuously reminiscent of scientism. Surely, one cannot hide a certain uneasiness about the vagueness of the humanities which seem to confront us with unending discussion that hardly ever produces definitive or quantifiable results. Humanism deals with issues such as the best form of government, the meaning of human life and the lessons of history and human art, all of which are susceptible of infinite dialogue. Hence, there is the temptation to dismiss entirely this whole realm of knowledge as mere humanistic salivation and to adopt a reductive perspective that would explain the human achievements out of a single, all-encompassing and almost mathematical foundation, a foundation that would be beyond the scope of humanism, be it the unconsciousness, the class structure, the unending play of linguistic signs, and so on. This reduction of human concerns to an underlying structure could very well be a product of scientism. It is perhaps less important for the humanities to adopt such a well-assured, objectified and anti-humanistic stance than to continue discussing openly and to learn from each other and from tradition concerning the issues that matter most to our humanity; and while we may not come to any algorithmical results soon, we will arrive at some formative truths in the process.

3. The context out of which anti-humanism blossomed is often forgotten. Even if Marx, Darwin and Freud elaborated their theories some generations ago, anti-humanism only emerged as an intellectual force in the sixties. It is in great part indebted to the literary and rhetorical success of the French structuralists or post-structuralists, whose most prominent intellectual figures are probably Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Even if both authors are gifted philosophers, endowed with the best of humanistic educations (one which is often wanting in their disciples), they still delighted in proclaiming that man was nothing but a "recent invention" and one which would soon fade in light of the new positivism of linguistic structures. Undoubtedly, there is some humanistic truth to the idea that modernity's focus on man has been overblown and was nothing but a recent happening (dating back, for Foucault, to the post-classicist age which obviously started with Kant at the beginning of the 19th century). In the fiercely competitive context of French philosophy, this anti-humanistic reading was levelled against the philosophy of existentialism which

dominated the intellectual scene, at least in the *sixième arrondissement*, throughout the forties and the fifties. Sartre had proclaimed in his famous pamphlet, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, that every truth and every action imply a properly human context and subjectivity.¹ Again, this might appear tautological. Nonetheless, it was precisely the task of the anti-humanists to show that the human perspective is inadequate if one wishes to understand how truth and knowledge are produced in our societies and how action and subjectivity are governed by subterranean power structures. The demystifying authors referred to above (i.e., Marx, Freud, Darwin), whose findings were also confirmed by the intuitions of Nietzsche and the ethnological writings of Claude Lévy-Strauss, drove home the point that it was perhaps a limitation to concentrate on human subjectivity and its capacities of choice and decision heralded by the existentialists. While a humanist might agree to a large extent with this "eccentric" understanding of man, which one can oppose to an anthropocentric reading, one can still question whether it misses its target by attacking existentialism. As a matter of fact, it might even have concealed its own origins by distancing itself so massively from existentialism. Furthermore, even if existentialism devoted great attention to the human predicament, no idea is more essential to it than man's "thrownness" into the universe. Heidegger spoke of man's *Geworfenheit* or his being thrown into a world in which he is left to himself, a situation French translators rendered by the dramatic notion of "dereliction". Therefore, man is not really at the center of his universe for the existentialists. He only has to gain a proper understanding of his limited and anguishing self out of this basic experience of being thrown into finite existence. The existentialists themselves were the first to investigate these broader structures into which mankind finds itself thrown. For example, Sartre explored the social webs of interaction in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, and the later Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty discovered to what extent language is a more primordial issue for the understanding of man. In this way, the existentialists who developed the anti-Cartesian notion of "thrownness" were the first "post-existentialists". However, this fact was occulted by the devastating anti-humanistic attack on existentialism that has remained a leading

¹. J.-P. Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (1947), Paris: Nagel, 1968, 12: "Nous entendons par existentialisme une doctrine qui rend la vie humaine possible et qui, par ailleurs, déclare que toute vérité et toute action impliquent un milieu et une subjectivité humaine."

topos to this day (i.e, in the guise of deconstructivism and post-modernism). One might be tempted to ask if this anti-humanism was nothing after all but an over-reaction against humanistic existentialism and, moreover, one which ignored its genuine existentialist origins.

4. Finally, I would also like to address an objection to humanism that might seem extrinsic, but which nevertheless has a lot of appeal today: namely, the belief that humanism is vitiated by an elitist or ideological conception of knowledge. This criticism of humanism stems from a sociological critique which has been espoused in many different forms.

The interest in tradition is often viewed as ideological *per se*. Only an ignorance of humanism and its relationship to tradition could foster such a view. In fact, humanism started off precisely with a critique of tradition (in the classical sense of *critica*), which is different from the meaning understood today whereby critique is somehow identified with the capacity of each human being to express his or her judgement on anything, even if he or she lacks the expertise to do so. For the Renaissance, the *ars critica* was the discipline that was concerned with the "critical" editing of ancient texts. If critical judgement was called for in such an enterprise, it was because the texts that were transmitted to us suffered alterations in the process of transmission. In order to go back to the original texts and their intended meaning, one had to critically identify and remove the misunderstandings that were imposed on the text through its transmission. In our modern culture, to study tradition is *ipso facto* to be critical of it; and while humanists study tradition because they hope to learn from it, it is precisely this willingness that makes one suspicious of the ideology that has been sedimented throughout tradition. Furthermore, it is only if one has been trained to carefully treat tradition and history that one can develop a sense for anything like a "critique of ideology". Today, the critique of ideologies takes on a very superficial level. It often simply consists in developing some kind of conspiracy theory (hardly ever verifiable) which stems from some feature of culture one happens to dislike. As is well known, conspiracy theories are self-serving and self-immune, and are hence unlikely to contribute to the development of a reflexive acumen. What can contribute to that is, on the opposite, direct and critical commerce with the tradition.

However, there is another point to the anti-humanistic argument and its

massive repudiation of the traditional bias, which is made with some legitimacy. It alleges is that the humanistic conception is one which fosters an elitist conception of knowledge, one which is left to a small elite in society. Indeed, very few people know Greek and Latin or have read Pico della Mirandola. The focus on classical books or great names in history or the arts, which would be constitutive of humanism, would therefore be ideological. For instance, it could ignore parts of the tradition which were characterized by bigotry against an oppressed majority, against women or against minorities. In this regard, this general critique of tradition is certainly a major part of the anti-humanist atmosphere of today.

However, this critique can be reconciled with a humanistic outlook on culture. Indeed, who ever claimed that a critique of bigotry cannot be part of our humanistic relationship to history and tradition? On the contrary, there is nothing more characteristic of history than to point out the prejudices in the tradition which no longer bind us; and there are certainly other ways to conceive of history than to learn dates by heart and to study the feats of great men. But, again, who ever said that our conception of history and our canon of great deeds had been fixed once and for all? In fact, critical acquaintance with tradition teaches that tradition itself is always studied and applied very differently from one generation to the next.

For humanism, it is not important that all human beings study a specific form of tradition, that they should read Plato, know some Latin or listen to classical music. That would be imposing a model of knowledge which one could label "elitist". The only insight that is essential to humanism - and if it is trivial, all the better - is that one never ceases to learn from one's encounter with tradition and that through the human sciences we can grasp truths we would never gain access to if scienticism were the sole mode of knowledge. This human wisdom is still part of our system of education, even if its realm appears to be shrinking in light of the advances made by the exact sciences. What is worth defending is not the specific content or canon of the human sciences, but the humanistic insight that the scientific model of rationality has obvious limits.

The perspective that was defended in this paper has been a hermeneutic one which follows the lead of Hans-Georg Gadamer in his defence of the human sciences. As is well known, the hermeneutic philosophy of Gadamer

descends directly from Heidegger. However, as we have argued in the preceeding section, if Gadamer departs in any way from Heidegger, it is surely in his understanding of humanism as a living force in our civilization. The later Heidegger wrote an open *Letter on Humanism* in 1946 in which he responded to a query by a young intellectual, Jean Beaufret, who asked if it was possible after the Second World War and the death camps of the Nazis to give a new meaning to the word humanism. The underlying meaning of Beaufret's question was whether or not one could still have faith in human reason and its promise of emancipation after Auschwitz. If the question was addressed to Heidegger, it was because his philosophy of existence seemed to be one of the most outspoken representatives of humanistic philosophy. Heidegger perhaps surprised Beaufret and his readers, who were unaware of the shift that had already occurred in his philosophy, by asking in turn if it was indeed that necessary to retain the notion of humanism. In this letter, Heidegger espoused the view that humanism rests on some form of anthropocentrism in that it reduces every form of Being to the human perspective. In this respect, humanism would be following the metaphysics of Plato that reduced Being to the appearance (*eidos*) it had for the human eye or the eye of the apprehending soul. What Heidegger condemns in this form of metaphysics is its intellectualization and reduction of all there is to the idea that man can have of it. In this intellectual, metaphysical and humanist perspective, the sheer gratuity of Being which cannot be reduced to its functionality for human purposes is missed. Heidegger thus wishes to overcome both metaphysics and humanism, which concentrate on the human condition, in order to develop an outlook on Being which would not be subordinate to the requirements of human reason or functionality. Heidegger thus urges "an open resistance to 'humanism'"¹; and it is precisely by such a resistance, or so Heidegger believes, that one will be able to transcend the age of technology and its anthropocentric understanding of Being.

It is exactly here that Gadamer's hermeneutics ceases to follow Heidegger. For if Heidegger abandons the tradition of humanism, on what ground can he still criticize the age of technology and the scientific understanding of knowledge it sanctifies? In other words, Heidegger's "anti-

¹. M. Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 225.

humanism", of which the influence on French philosophy has been tremendous, would leave the entire field of knowledge to the empire of technology, and this perhaps despite Heidegger's basic instincts. What one can learn from Gadamer's defense of the human sciences and his apology of humanism is that the ground that enables Heidegger to dispute the advance of technology is to be found nowhere else than in the humanistic tradition itself. It is precisely in the context of humanism that Gadamer will indeed find an effective "resistance to the claims of modern science."¹ It is interesting to note that Gadamer uses the word "resistance" (*Widerstand*) when he alludes to the actual possibilities of the humanistic tradition. Whereas Heidegger advocated an open "resistance" *against* humanism, Gadamer unearths in the forgotten tradition of humanism an instance that can fuel a counter-reaction against the hybrid claims of modern science to encompass all there is to know. Heidegger would in a way ignore the tacitly humanistic motive of his anti-humanist attack on the sole empire of technology and its model of objectified science. Heidegger would thus be more of a humanist than he has led us to believe in his *Letter on Humanism*. In the view espoused by hermeneutics, the limits of the age of scientific rationality do not necessarily point to a new age that has yet to appear on the horizon of history. Such a utopian new beginning is not a real possibility for our humanity. Rather, the limits of rationality could reacquaint us with the tradition of humanism and the resistance it has always offered against the illegitimate claims of scienticism. We would do well therefore to rediscover its modest understanding of man as a being who is in constant need of learning from history. It is the recent notion of man as one who can destroy the tradition at ease which is shriekingly immodest.

¹. WM, 23; TM, 18.